China’s Second Generation of Migrant Workers: 
A Participant-Observation Study

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Abstract. Understood to be the largest internal mass migration in history, the movement of migrant workers from rural to urban areas of China is increasingly capturing attention from professionals, writers, and officials alike. However, because important subtleties in migrant workers’ stories are missing from public awareness, this study chose to explore the working lives of the employees at two Beijing restaurants in the summer of 2010. During this period, the author spent one month working as a dishwasher and, later, a table runner in order to build relationships with his coworkers. The experiences gleaned from this participant-observation study suggest that this generation of migrating individuals thinks differently and faces social structures that vary from its predecessor. These shifts have serious implications not only for the fate of China’s cultural integrity, but also for the domestic and international markets in which it participates.
Prologue

Let’s travel to Beijing. Fast forward through fourteen hours of direct flight until we’re just about approaching Beijing Capital International Airport. Look out your window and notice how the mountains of northern China are slowly melting down to flatter communities with more roads and lights. For the briefest, final minute during the plane’s descent you think you’re looking down at what may be early Chinese suburbs, but before you can think about it too much you’ve made impact with the tarmac. And then our heads finish bobbling.

Welcome to Beijing, or as the feature song and oft-trumpeted slogan of the 2008 Summer Olympics goes, “Beijing huanying ni.” Beijing welcomes you. Beijing’s airport welcomes you first by measuring your body temperature with a thermal image scanner (a leftover from the 2009 H1N1 flu pandemic), but after the customs and the trams and the cavernous baggage claim area, the city is indeed welcoming. In fact, a whole fleet of welcoming taxicab drivers awaits you in an orderly queue the moment you leave the airport; this is a reminder that you're in China’s capital and governmental hub, a city with a responsibility to look good. The weight of this duty has been intensified ever since the Summer Olympics were held here, during a time when Beijing and China seemed to suddenly fall under the international gaze.

Ask your cabbie about the Beijing Olympics, about how it affected his life. He smiles and tells you that that summer was a good time for taxicab drivers. If you look ethnically Chinese, he throws in a sidelong glance and remarks that the Olympics brought in a lot of business card-toting laowai. While literally translated as “old foreigner,” laowai is not an easy term to explain. Contextually it may mean “foreigner,” or “Caucasian,” or it may be pejorative (something like the Spanish word “gringo”), or it may be entirely neutral.

You can ask your cabbie about it. The majority of cab drivers in Beijing are wonderful conversation partners, and as yours talks about the expatriate community that exists in the city, you notice that as you head towards the heart of Beijing, the Airport Expressway first intersects a 5th Ring Road,” and then a 4th Ring Road, and so on down to the 2nd Ring Road, within which is housed the famous Tiananmen Square and Forbidden City, as well as the lesser-known but exceptionally busy Wangfujing street, not to mention the lakeside bars of Houhai, some amazingly old architecture, and plenty of infuriatingly bad traffic.
From a bird's eye view, Beijing is, as suggested by the mention of ring roads, laid out more or less as a series of concentric, boxy rings crisscrossed by an ever-expanding network of subway lines, "bridge" roads, and side streets. In the northeast, nearest to the airport, is Chaoyang District, haven of foreigners and upper-class Chinese and therefore unsurprisingly home to a wide variety of sumptuous dining and the busiest nightclubs in the city. In the northwest is Haidian District, also known as "University District" for the schools clustered in the area. Between the two you'll find the Olympic Village, featuring the world-famous "Bird's Nest" and "Water Cube" structures, and south of that is the city center. Unless you're a native Beijinger, you're not likely to have seen much of the southern half of the city, which is conspicuously less accessible by subway.

The 2008 Olympics brought with it some environmentally-minded efforts, but even despite the shutdown of a number of factories and an ongoing policy forbidding personal vehicles from driving on half of the days of the week (based on whether the final digit of a car's license plate is odd or even), Beijing is a smoggy city. Blue skies are a luxury to be enjoyed only after particularly windy days, when the dust and pollution have been temporarily swept out of the city. However, if on those rare clear days you look to the horizons on the north and west, you'll notice that Beijing is partially cupped by broad mountain ranges. These are excellent in terms of contributing to good Fengshui, but I'm told they also cause pollution to build up in municipality area. Don't be surprised if your allergies have already begun acting up.

As you start seeing more of Beijing, you'll notice that you are only one of many visitors, the majority of whom come from other parts of China. Indeed, for every cheesy photo taken of an international tourist in front of a famous building, there are dozens of others attesting to the popularity of domestic tourism within China. At the same time, there is another far-less obvious body of domestic visitors who are, perhaps contradictorily, here to stay. This population hails from the rural areas and neighboring provinces nearest to Beijing, and they have come not to take pictures but to make money. Ask the man selling chestnuts on the street, or the woman in the salon, or the teenager in the Wal-Mart uniform—none of them is from Beijing, even if they have made it their temporary home.

1 As many car-owners in Beijing have done, the obvious way around this rule is simply to purchase two cars, one with an even final digit and one with an odd final digit.
Indeed, in some sense, the city is a home away for many, and sometimes I dare to count myself in with this group. I first came to Beijing on a study abroad trip shortly after the 2008 Olympics, and found myself returning the next summer for research, the following winter on a brief-but-emotionally-ridden romantic odyssey, and now I am back again for a second summer of research. The focus of my study is, in fact, that group of semi-permanent domestic visitors to cities like Beijing who have left home in order to find work.

The presence of low-wage migrant workers is not a phenomenon unique to China, nor is it a new occurrence there (stories of migration for work stretch easily back to the 80s), but there are a few intriguing things about this group in particular. For one, it is enormous, adding up to some 230 million people\(^1\) constantly moving about the country, going from farm to city and back again. This number has a functional immensity, as well; while the National Bureau of Statistics of China may report 19 million registered residents of Beijing\(^2\), it is not unlikely that another 10 million unregistered individuals are living and working within the municipality bounds. These are the workers staffing Beijing’s remaining factories, its restaurants, its construction yards, and so on for much of the city’s blue collar or industrial work.

Secondly, the population of low-wage migrant workers seems to be changing in a number of important ways. For starters, roughly half of the 230 million workers are individuals between the ages of 16 and 30, forming what has been described as a “second generation of migrant workers.”\(^2\) This second generation is facing a different urban China than the one into which its parents ventured: it offers striking infrastructural improvements, a constant bombardment of new technology, rumors of healthcare reform, and a society which less and less resents their arrival. As far as this younger generation’s general character, we hear reports that they are more likely to go on strike or form unions, are more tech-savvy and connected with the world than ever before, and more often than not are leaving home without any plans to return; this depicts a stark contrast to the previous generation, which traveled with the express intent of bringing money home to the family.\(^3,1\)

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My hope as a writer and a student is to explore the subtleties of this shift to a new generation of low-wage workers, asking specifically what real-life situations motivate individuals to leave home, as well as where these Chinese migrant workers are going in the future. My previous experiences in China have made it clear to me that there is more to these folks than the popular media picture of exhausted workers toiling under appalling ‘sweatshop’ conditions for extremely low wages.” As such, my approach was to use participant observation to study this labor force while working alongside some of its members, hopefully with the ultimate goal of communicating their perspectives on their place within China’s mass migrations.

More specifically, I planned to spend one month working full time (40 hours per week) in a medium-sized Chinese restaurant either as a dishwasher or a similar role. Kitchen work appealed to me because it promised to be social (as opposed to panhandling or working as a security guard), it was easy to find (restaurants almost ubiquitously post ‘help wanted’ signs), it was work that I knew how to do, and it was work that involved a minimum of legal or physical risk.

What follows is a true-life account of the month I spent doing restaurant work in Beijing in the summer of 2010. While most names and identifying details of people I met (and the places where they worked) have been changed in this study in order to protect their privacy, theirs is the important story in this research, and it is my hope that their voices and personalities will shine throughout this work.

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Part 1: “Eight Square Terrace Restaurant”

True academics are all at once bewildering, awe-inspiring, and awkwardly tragic. I often think about Archie Carr, author of “The Sea Turtle: So Excellent a Fishe,” who spent most of his life dedicated to the cause of sea turtle conservation. For decades the award-winning zoologist bred sea turtles in the laboratory and released them carefully into the wild, only to discover later that the baby turtles he had raised were all male. We now know that the temperature at which sea turtle eggs are incubated dictates their gender; under 30°C, almost all of the hatchlings develop into males.

“And you know how many males you need to propagate a species,” said Dr. Thomas Williams, my own Zoology professor back at North Central College. He held up his index finger, and what he said, though years ago, still haunts my memory.

- Carr must have died a heartbroken man.”

I find that this brand of nigh-obsessive (and sometimes-heartrending) passion for a given subject can be found across many fields of study, and certainly within anthropology. My background reading has suggested that participant observation, which is one of the core methodologies of cultural anthropology, was once regularly conducted over a series of years; only more recently has single-year ethnographic research become acceptable. In other words, a researcher should spend at least a full year integrated into a social environment, focusing on gaining a greater understanding of that culture.

This means that my one-month study can only aspire to be the academic equivalent of a half-forkful of crumbs when compared to the great cake of multicultural learning which real anthropologists pull out of the oven. On the other hand, a palate-piquing taste of culture may be exactly what I’m after right now. I’ve always believed that a surprising amount can be learned by spending a single evening in an unfamiliar world; surely one month washing dishes in an urban restaurant can teach me something valuable about low-wage migrant workers in today’s China.

My plan was simple, and, as I believed, cleverly Chinese by design. I would have one of my contacts in Beijing introduce me to some random friend and restaurant owner, and I would
find myself with solid access to some low-income workers. Success in China is notoriously achieved on an it's-who-you-know basis.

—Well, we’re low-income workers, too,” says Jeff Zhang¹ when I bounce my idea off of him. Jeff is a real estate agent who works nearby my friend's apartment; I got to know him last year, during a different trip to Beijing. He says that 10,000RMB per month, or some 1,500USD per month, counts as low-income. However, I’m fairly certain that this figure is an order of magnitude above what dishwashers earn around here.

I further explain that I am planning on looking for restaurant work—dishwashing, in particular—and that I am about to head to a few nearby restaurants to try my luck. He suggests that I consider work as a security guard or doorman at a hotel, instead.

—That way, it won’t be so difficult,” he says, and nods grandly at me.

—I don’t mind,” I say, quickly, —For me, the tougher the better.” Taken out of context, that sounds like macho statement, but I just want to have more to write about. As one of my English professors says regarding quality writing from real-life experience, —You need to ask yourself: how can I make my situation ‘worser’?”

—How about construction work, then?” says Jeff, his soft, meekly mustached face hinting at a grin. Even dressed in his crisp white-and-navy work uniform, his boyish features give me the feeling of a five-foot-six puppy, and I can’t help but overlook his indirect challenge of my mettle. Turns out, he has other advice to give. For example, Jeff believes that I shouldn’t be honest about what I’m hoping to do once I get to my restaurant.

—If you tell them that you’re a student,” he says, —A student doing an investigation, or research, or whatever, there’s no way they’ll let you work there.” This is an uncomfortable thought, since I’m aware of the generally-accepted-and-endorsed ethical² expectation for ethnographers to always make their research goals clear to and obtain informed consent from their consultants. I shudder at the thought of telling Dr. Keys (the chair of the Research and

¹ Some names have been changed to western aliases for reading ease. Most of the people in this work do not originally have western names.

² Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association
Ethics Committee at my school) that I had spun an intricate web of lies in order to get my study off the ground.

In the end, Jeff decides to personally take me to go look for work. Secretly, I’m relieved. I also can’t help but continue to marvel at how Chinese people always seem to be able to get out of the office in order to help a friend or relative, and do so with impunity. His coworkers were sitting right across the desk as I conversed with Jeff, and expressed no reaction when he offered to take time off work to help me job hunt. Well, almost no reaction.

—he’s from the United States,” says Jeff, before I can answer. A meiji huaqiao, he adds, which translates to American overseas Chinese.”

—Oh. He speaks pretty okay Chinese.”

It’s hard to know whether to express thanks for a half-hearted compliment when it’s not even really directed at you.

* * * *

Jeff and I take a two-seater electric bike to the busiest street near my apartment and stop at the first restaurant on the corner. I watch him sweep in, shoulders back and chin slightly lifted, straight past the waitress asking, Table for two?” and all the way to the back of the establishment, where he asks for the manager. In a flurry of Chinese too fast for me to fully comprehend, he informs the waitresses behind the counter that I am living nearby and am looking for part-time work as a busboy.

—really am thinking I’m going to go for dishwashing work,” I’d said earlier. I guess the idea of working in front of a sink for hours on end has a sadistically romantic tug for me, or something.

—But usually they need more busboys than dishwashers,” he had argued. Perhaps he was hoping to spare me from truly grueling work, and since servers in China are almost always women, I was being presented as a potential busboy.
- Who’s looking for work?” asks the manager. Jeff refers to me, and by this point a group of idle restaurant staff has materialized in a circle around us, curious at the possible new arrival. Two of the uniformed women in front of me giggle when we make eye contact, and then share a quick murmur that, unsurprisingly, I can’t catch. I’m not quite sure what to make of that, but do notice my posture straightening a little, for, well, no reason at all.

- Is he a student?” asks the manager, recovering from her giggle-and-murmur interlude.

- No, he’s not,” says Jeff, his voice leaden. Definitely not true.

- What year is he?”

- What year were you born?” says Jeff, momentarily derailed.

- Uh, ‘88,” I say, and stammer a little. Something inside me sighs deeply at myself for the lie.

- We can’t hire students,” says the manager, then.

- He’s not,” says Jeff, again. – Really, he’s not.”

- I’m not,” I echo, and then nervously pull a chapstick out of my pocket. It’s something to distract myself from the standoff, which has now become a scene where some six or seven Chinese people are staring at my hand as I apply lipbalm in a circle around my mouth, as if I am doing something freakishly foreign. This, come to think of it, may in fact be the case. Then:

- We can’t take students, really.” For some reason, the manager is smiling, now.

- He’s really, really not a student.” Mr. Wang seems frustrated, but he manages a smile, too.

- Sorry,” she says, and after another pause, -I’m sorry.”

*           *

At the restaurant next door, an older man answers to – manager.” He sports slightly lopsided, dark features.
"Which one of you?" he says, and when we reply, he takes an uncomfortably long stare at me, which incorporates at least a three second gaze at my face, followed by a slow scan down my dark green t-shirt and navy cargo shorts, which itself is topped off with another three seconds of staring at my flip flops. For some reason, I feel extra self-conscious about the flip flops. Earlier, when Jeff had advocated that I lie about my circumstances and pretend that I’m really out to make some cash, I’d pointed to the distinctly foreign way I dress and exclaimed, “You think they’ll believe me?” And while this man hadn’t stared at my outfit for too long, Chinese fashion is such that even a rattier selection from my American closet would stand out as oddly trendy.

Ultimately, the dealbreaker at this restaurant was that I am only looking for short-term work—one or two months. The same went for many of the other restaurants that we visited, though the questions I was asked varied slightly each time—where was I from, when could I work, how old was I, could I work at the restaurant’s location on the other side of the city—and each time, Jeff and I were turned away.

After hearing him mutter, “Quite difficult, this, after all,” I remind him that I am willing to work as a volunteer, too, and that maybe I should advertise this. He instantly disregards this idea as preposterous. And so, seven restaurants in, I start praying for better luck.

That’s when we reach a restaurant around the corner, where we are first told that they don’t need busboys. I’m half-straddling the electric bike on our way out when the restaurant’s manager actually hurries out the door and waves at us with a couple shouts of “Ey! Ey!”

“Can you scrub dishes?” she says, catching up to us. She has a heavy Northern accent, which adds a distinctive “er” to the last syllable of her question.

“I can,” I say, alighting from the bike’s back seat. This feels like destiny. At the same time, she remains skeptical.

“Can he handle the work?” she says, looking at Jeff.

“Yes. I’m able to chiku,” I say, and I take a princely step forward. To chiku means, literally, to eat bitterness.”
He can't work evenings,” says a calm Jeff, who by this point has become a very capable agent. “So, he is willing to work for half-wages, from 9am to 5pm.”

“Our circumstance is like this,” says the manager, after considering this unusual work schedule. “We start at 9am, take a break at 2pm, and then start again at 5pm.”

“I can also work until 6pm, too,” I say, losing my nonchalance for a moment. It occurs to me at this point that it doesn't much matter when I get off work; I had just thought it a reasonable, sustainable plan to just be working 40 hours each week. She ponders my reply, before answering:

“How about this—after 2pm, if you’ve finished the dishes from lunch, you’re free to go.”

“That sounds fine.”

“You can handle the work, are you sure?” she says again.

“Yeah. I can.”

“Come by tomorrow morning then, and give it a try. If you can handle it, then you can stay on.”

“Will there be someone to teach me?” I say. I’m not sure why this question pops out of my mouth at this moment.

“Hah?”

“Teach me,” I repeat, wishing that my Chinese was more consistently understandable. “Like, instruct me. Like, the basics.”

“Oh, yeah, yeah,” she says, with one eyebrow raised. “That’s okay.”

“Okay.”

* * *

My new manager isn't the only one with reservations as to my ability to slave away in a kitchen for hours on end. Later, Jeff remarks again, with a cautionary tone, that foodservice
really is hard work, to which my response is to wonder if I really do look that soft and green and baby-faced.

―I once did this kind of work, you know,‖ he says, watching me with a sly, high-eyebrowed look.

―Was it really that difficult? Were your hands washed raw?‖

―Well, I was actually a busboy, so not my hands as much… but my arm was really sore, at first.‖ He gestures at his arm, which he folds into some kind of a broken wing-shape. I get the idea, but I’m set on this dishwashing thing, and say so.

―Okay,‖ says Jeff. ―See how it goes, then.‖

July 29, 2010 – Thursday (Day 1)

As I make the five-minute bike trip from the apartment that I’m sharing with a friend of mine to my new place of work, it occurs to me that this is the only real job that I’ve ever had other than the six weeks I was a violin teacher, two years back. I park my creaking bike near the front of the restaurant, finish the pear I was eating on the way, and step in through the open double doors.

―Hello?‖ I say. There’s no response, and I don’t have the courage to say it again, louder, so I walk back out to my bike. The listing on the window shows that the restaurant opens at 11:00am, so it makes sense that I was asked to come in at 9. I also notice that hours go till 11:00pm, which is rather unnerving.

When I walk in again, an older woman greets me. It’s not my manager, who hired me yesterday, but she seems about the same age—somewhere in her older forties, or maybe even fifties. Then again, guessing the age of a Chinese woman has always been particularly challenging. This woman could really be anywhere from forty to sixty, as far as I can tell. Her facial features seem concentrated towards the center of her face, and she’s a bit smaller than woman who hired me yesterday.
—Is the boss here?” I ask.

—Not right now,” she says, and then instructs me to wheel my bike around back, where someone has set up a table and some chairs underneath a makeshift tin roof. It strikes me as some sort of an open-air break room.

—Are you able to do this work?” she says, abruptly but not harshly.

—Um, I’m able. More or less.”

—Okay, then. Can you kill a fish?”

—What? Oh. I’ve killed fish before.” This is a fact. Easily ten dollars’ worth of aquarium creatures perished during my neglectful childhood reign over their undersea kingdom.

The woman leads me through a back door into a dimly-lit kitchen, which I instantly mentally classify as —as nightmarish as I imagined, but not worse.” I’ll admit that there were moments, as I thought up this project, where I imagined I might be working in the bright-white, shiny-steel working conditions that we see on the cooking channel, but I ultimately expected something more like this. A bare bulb hangs over my head, shedding a weak light that somehow penetrates through what I am convinced is the visual manifestation of the stench of rotting corpses. The pathetically-grouted brown tiles on which I stand don’t really cover the floor, but really just comprise a series of walkways. Certain corners are pretty much just big blobs of grout.

—Here, this one’s for you,” she says, having led me to a sink in the corner of the kitchen, which is actually broken up into three or four smaller units. To demonstrate, the woman energetically scrubs at the fish’s side with a stiff-bristled metal brush. The limp, foot-long creature stares at me with glossy eyes.

—Is it already dead?” I say. She replies with a generic syllable of affirmation (”Ehh!”), and I realize that to shayu or —kill fish” must mean, more generally, to —take care of” or clean them.

—Do you know how to scale a fish?” she says, vigorously continuing her demonstration. —It’s like this. See? You use the scissors to remove the insides by cutting from here to here.” At
this point she began forcefully using terminology I’d never heard before, and with her thick northern accent, it went something like this:

―And then make sure you BLERR the JIERR. Like this. You just zaiii right here and, like this, BLERR the JIERR.” It occurs to me that I am unable to distinguish between the verbs of kitchen work and the nouns that describe fish organs; all of these words come out as nondescript kung-fu-shouted monosyllables that usually end in the signature –ERR” sound favored by all Beijing natives.¹

It turns out that Chinese people from other provinces joke about the way that Beijingers speak in much the same way that some Americans generalize the language usage of Canadians (who certainly use –eh?” after each and every sentence), and tend to assume that they will fit into Aussie culture provided they can master the iconic, –Ello, mate!”

I pick up the fish, and even dead, it manages to squirm out of my grasp. Chinese restaurants leave fish heads on because customers like being served the –whole fish”—a quanyu—partly because some folks specifically enjoy eating fish heads, and partly because leaving the head on suggests some semblance of freshness. Unfortunately, it means that the fish can engage (both unnervingly and unfairly) in staring contests, and as far as freshness is concerned, I’m fairly sure that this fish has been dead for several hours already.

I scrape at the fish, which responds by propelling scales in every direction, including my face. Pleased to find that it is far more resilient than I feared, I then turn it over and violently rend (that is, BLERR) the gills (also known as JIERR) out of its body,² and make a slit from the base of the head to the anus, trying my best not to cut anything internal and summon a mess of guts all over my hands. Unfortunately, most of the organs manage to detonate themselves despite my best effort and a solid gush of red and mystery color spills out. Maybe the fish had been beaten to death.

The cleaning process ends with my probing out the stubborn, twiddly bits of fish guts from deep within the body, and my first task of my first day is complete. The next few jobs I am

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¹ For example, –mifen” (which means “rice noodle”) becomes “miferr” when spoken by someone from Beijing.
² This, incidentally, does indeed involve a swift, twisting gouging or “zaiii” motion.
given are far less traumatic: I am led to the alley beside the restaurant, where I sit on a half-
broken crate and cut, trim, and clean giant leeks for a little while. I find this oddly therapeutic, as
is my second task, which involves tearing the tips off of a basket of string beans. Perhaps it is the
fact that I am out in the sun, or that there is no stench of death there, in the alley, or that I am
beginning to forget what sliminess is.

Something else occurs to me, as I squat in the alley with my vegetables: my
transformation from "interesting foreigner" to "Beijing commoner" has taken no time at all.
Already, better-dressed neighbors are walking by me without even a glance. There's a
commonly-used term, laobaixing, which translates to "old hundred kind." There are a hundred
others just like you. Simply based on where I sit and what I do, I have become laobaixing, and
it's a weird feeling.

By the time I step back into the windowless kitchen, the rest of the staff have all arrived.
All in all, there are three men present, each wearing paper hats (kind of like what hot dog sellers
in the US wear) and fantastically grody white short-sleeve uniform shirts. One of them has his
unbuttoned down to a hand-width above his belly button, which is visible at certain angles. It
seems that two of the men are actual cooks (who work over the stoves), and the other is
responsible for preparing the vegetables and meat that go into the dishes that customers order.

There are also three younger women in this restaurant, who are combination servers and
hostesses. They're dressed in plain clothes, as if they just walked in off the street. One girl, who
might be twenty (or forty, or something), sports a lacy pink top and strikes me as mild and fairly-
good natured; she says she's only been here for a few days.

Another girl, who hails from Hebei province (just south of Beijing), has been around for
a week, and is definitely the smiley one of the group, with slightly rodent-like features that
twitch as she asks me the majority of questions. It turns out that she has already completed three
years of undergraduate study.

The last girl doesn't seem to want anything to do with random American undergraduate
researchers. Before she turns her ashen countenance away from me, I can't help but notice that
her eyes aren't quite aligned in the same direction. Someone says that she's been here for a
whole year, already. They’re mostly interested in where I’m from, and why I’m here. I ask whether they’re here for the long or short term, to which they reply:

―We’ll see.‖

It turns out that my duties in the morning are pretty minimal; even once customers arrive, dishes don’t show up for a while, so much of what I do as a dishwasher is not, in fact, dishwashing. This still leaves me with dead time that I can spend sitting outside, either in the alley or the aforementioned –open-air break room.‖ It’s in the latter that I meet the owners of the restaurant—the actual –bosses.‖

When I meet the first (who I come to address as –Boss Fan”) and explain that I’m from the United States, he bursts out laughing.

―Why on earth would you do something like this?‖ he says, chuckles still escaping him intermittently.

―I want to…” I search for the right words, which suddenly refuse to come. —..To learn me some experience?‖ My Chinese can be really awkward sometimes, but it only makes me more of a curiosity to Boss Fan. He asks me questions about the US and how I feel about China. He wonders if I’m planning to start a Chinese restaurant back home. After all, his good friend’s brother had done this, with great success.

―Is that something that you’d like to do?‖ I say.

―No,” he says. –It’d be enough for me to make it big in China. Besides, it would take a lot of money to do it in the United States.”

I ask him whether he’s ever been abroad, and he replies with a quiet –No.” However, his younger brother has gone to several countries, and finally started a restaurant somewhere. I also ask about his business, and discover that the restaurant I’m at is about ten years old. Apparently, it fared better in its first five years, when customers would sometimes wait in line to just get into the restaurant. Was it the menu that had changed? Well, while the menu had indeed changed to meet the needs of customers, the main influence was that of more and more restaurants opening up nearby, which meant more competition, more options, and an increase in customers voicing
opinions that one restaurant bests another, or that one is more pleasant than the other. Furthermore, the economic downturn has been detrimental in terms of customers becoming less willing to eat out, but this was a new phenomenon.

—Will it become progressively more difficult to succeed, then?” I say, and he shakes his head.

—No. Whatever you do, if you do it diligently, you can make it.”\(^1\)

I later meet Boss Kang, but because his young son has a fever today, he doesn't stick around to talk for long. As did Boss Fan, he offers me a smoke, which I decline. Unfortunately, this makes me feel like a coward, a poor researcher, or both. Surely, a real participant-observant would just man up and smoke with the guys. In fact, I know of researchers who have done things like smoke to fit in, which makes sense especially in places like the south of China, where virtually everybody chain smokes.

Talking to the bosses together is interesting. They banter with each other as much as they tease me, and consequently enjoy co-lecturing me about the differences between insulting and bantering, among other things. When Boss Kang laughs, his entire upper body laughs with him. His appearance is generally comical; the very skinny man dresses in a white sleeveless shirt, is bald, and has bushy eyebrows.

The bosses tell me about \textit{jizei}, which is an insulting term for people who make much ado about nothing; for example, a \textit{jizei} is someone who keeps track of who has treated who to dinner how many times. The bosses agree that people who live in Shanghai tend to be \textit{jizeis}.

—But we Beijingers are more like a big lake,” says Boss Fan. —We don't stress about little things, we just take it all in.”

—Out there,” adds Boss Kang. —There are good people, and bad people. That’s society for you.”

\(^1\) I once read an anthropologist’s reflection on translating dialogue into English; she suggested that a literal translation tended to make speakers sound either oddly primitive or rather old and sagely and ultimately made a case for, essentially, artistic translation. Unfortunately, even my artistic translations still sound old and sagely, but I’m tempted to attribute this to the fact that older Chinese folks (and business owners in particular) actually do have a tendency to talk like sages.
—Then what are you?” laughs Boss Fan. —Good or bad?”
—I am neither good nor bad!” says the other, and they laugh.

At this point I notice that our restaurant somehow houses another, smaller establishment, which seems to sell noodles. The two kitchens apparently work together, freely sharing supplies and bringing eggs and noodles back and forth. At the other restaurant, there’s a girl working there, who is dressed in a black cocktail dress that manages to somehow stay unsullied.

This morning, I also watched, on two separate occasions, two girls come in to look for work. Each was approached by the woman who hired me yesterday and turned out to be the wife of Boss Kang. Everyone addresses her with a term which translates literally to —Bosswife,” though I’ll call her —Mrs. Boss,” which is possibly a stronger conversion of her —name.”

Mrs. Boss had sent the first girl to talk to the bosses after hailing her approvingly as —a long-term one.” Apparently from the northeast, the young woman was tall, skinny, was dressed in a somewhat gaudy outfit, and avoided eye contact as she answered questions. She admitted to not having much experience, and was eventually offered a job on probation.

—How much is gongzi (—pay”)?” she asked, before heading out. The answer was too complicated for me to grasp in its entirety, but I heard something involving 1200-1300RMB per month, which is about $180 USD.

The second girl seemed more confident, and marketed herself as having a year’s experience; however, when she revealed that she could only work for a month (which made her a duanqi, or —short-term” staff), she was rejected.

—Darao nimenle,” she said. I’ve inconvenienced you.


As I’ll find later, our restaurant doesn’t really fuss over things like introductions, and I discover that most of my noteworthy demographic information has been passed on very quickly through the small restaurant.
“He’s from the States,” one waitress had shouted, across the dining area. “His parents are from Taiwan and Hong Kong!” Less shoutable is the answer to “Why is he here?”

Is it some kind of a… self-discipline thing?” asks the prep cook.

“I suppose.”

“Why don’t you just teach English?” asks Boss Kang. Teaching English is a surefire way for foreigners to make a lot of money—easily five or six times what I will be making from my dishes, and with much more reasonable hours.

And yet, I still hold that there is a certain romance to washing dishes. There something about how they come and go in waves, almost like the very workers who are washing them. Maybe I’m just going through the crazies of my first day on the job, but the patterns of busy and idle that are a constant reality as I wash dishes in this small restaurant must be something like the migrant workers who successfully pursue work (or end up idle) in accord with the boom and bust cycles of the economy. One moment, a lull, where you’re free to do whatever you want, and then suddenly, you’re so busy you can’t believe you ever knew what it meant to have a break.

Luckily, I did arrange breaks in my schedule—big ones. I told Mrs. Boss that I was only working from 9-5, and that I couldn’t work on weekends.

“But we don’t have weekends,” she said. I received a similar answer when I asked one of the servers how many days off she got each year.

“I don’t have days off,” she said. I guess asking questions is never quite as simple as we think. Overall, my work day is embarrassingly relaxed, compared to my coworkers. From 9am-11am, most of what I do is preparing vegetables. A few plates come in around 11am, but the real rush doesn’t come until noon. The flow of dishes really peaks at 1pm, when stacks of plates flow into the kitchen in large waves. By 2pm, the staff is given a break, but I’m generally still washing plates until 2:15pm, which is when the others call me to come eat lunch. The meal is communal, and rather paltry—distinctly, there is no meat involved, but the food is fresh and there is more than enough to fill us up.
By around 3:15 I’ve finished the last of the dishes (including those of my colleagues). I drape the slimy dishrag over the side of the sink and wipe my hands on my ever-more fetid t-shirt.

*   *   *   *

Once more, my ultimate aim is, indeed, to present the lives and stories of real-life low-wage migrant workers, not necessarily as representative of the entire population, but ideally as accurate representations of who they really are. As such, brief profiles of some of my coworkers (inasmuch as I got to know them) will be found within this series of narrated journal entries.

Profile: Sue

I never learn the full name of who we will call ⒽSue,” but at the restaurant she is often called –Dajie,” or –Big Sister,” which fits, given that Sue does appear to be about thirty years old, and also seems to take care of the others in one capacity or another, especially Jen and Qia. She has small eyes set in a worn complexion, but on all other counts she wears her hair and dresses like the other fuwuyuan, complete with croc-like footwear. Around her neck, she wears something on a red string—likely a jade pendant.

On the other hand, Sue seems to lead a more robust adult life than I first assumed. Once, when I asked about nightlife in Beijing, she explained that for her and her coworkers, evenings basically involve getting off work at ten-thirty, followed by washing clothes, a shower, -and by then it’s basically midnight, so we head to bed, since it’s hot out these days.”

A day or two later, Mao came in one morning, complaining about having had trouble sleeping the night before. According to her, Sue had been getting up in the middle of the night to throw up, after a fairly wild night out. No wonder Sue said that she was tired that day. But more importantly, these exchanges show that there is probably a world after-dark that isn't comfortably discussed.
The other thing I learned about Sue is that she has two older siblings, both married, and both farmers. What does this suggest? Sue also said that she herself was married, as well, but the way in which she said it made it seem like a joke.

July 30, 2010 – Friday (Day 2)

I'm still trying to figure out how scheduling is managed for my coworkers. At 2pm (which is that magical time between lunch and dinner when most of Beijing appears to stop eating for three hours), some of the staff disappear, and others stay. Yesterday, only one of the fuwuyuan (―servers‖) stayed back after 2pm, but today there are two of them. A new cook who showed up today also seems to be sticking around, as well as the prep-cook boy, who seems puzzled that I'm still sitting here, writing notes.

―Ni zou ba,‖ he says, which means ―You—go, okay?‖ but feels more like, ―Hey, you know, you should probably take advantage of this opportunity to get out of here while you can.‖ That was at 2:15pm. Fifteen minutes later, seeing me still sitting there, he grows more emphatic.

―Ni zên me hai mei zou?‖ he says, incredulously. ―Why haven't you gone yet [to your freedom]?‖ I don't really know how to answer him; I figure I'll just stick around the restaurant when I can, in order to get more face time with my coworkers. This has been a somewhat awkward issue, because earlier today I had decided to pursue the salary question with the management of the restaurant. If Chinese people can avoid talking about money, they will, even if it means leaving the terms of an employment ambiguous for weeks on end.

―And, by the way, I can't work on weekends,‖ I added, to clarify.

―We don't have weekends,‖ said Mrs. Boss, who smiled.

―No, I mean, I have other engagements on weekends,‖ I said. Actually, a more honest translation of my Chinese is probably, ―No, but, I have stuff to do on weekends.‖ This was true and not; true, because I was volunteering at a church to teach English on Saturdays evenings, and
not, because I could probably have sucked it up and worked on the rest of the weekends. This was a judgment call which haunted me for much of my research process.

—Well then, since you're not working on weekends,” sighed Mrs. Boss, —Then I can’t offer you the full 500RMB per month.” That’s what I would have been earning for seven 8-hour days a week.

—Yes,” I said, quickly. —I should receive less.” Once I recognized the bargaining tone in her voice, I suddenly wanted to get this process over with as soon as possible. 1

—How about 400RMB?” she said. 400RMB is something like $60 per month.

—That works! Thank you,” I said, and grinned. It was over.

I’m only just starting to comprehend how bizarre this job is. For $60 a month, $15 a week, $3 a day, less than forty cents an hour, I start off my day with the devastatingly awful smell of rotting things. I would have thought that the worst of the stench was experienced the day before, while I was elbow-deep in dishes, but something happens overnight; maybe the smell somehow bakes into something worse in the night hours, or maybe I’m just not ready to face it, but the initial whiff of the morning when I walk into the kitchen is like an olfactory punch.

Also, my first task for the day, once again, is to scale and gut fish. Apparently, three of the slippery things were found belly-up in the tank this morning, which automatically relegates fish-work to my tab. Today, the gills seem extra hard to yank out.

For whatever reason, at 9am the other restaurant staff haven’t arrived yet, other than the woman who trained me to —kill fish” yesterday. The woman is apparently related to Mrs. Boss somehow; she dresses almost exclusively in brown shirts, so we’ll call her Ms. Brown for convenience’s sake. Ms. Brown lives in a small dormitory that is built into the back of the restaurant, and also houses the three girl servers.

The dorm is somewhat dark, which I find unnerving. From where I stand outside the structure, all I can make out are some random bowls and cups among the beds, as well as a

1 If you’ve ever tried to bargain with a Chinese woman, you understand. You always lose.
number of fans, which click and whine as they sweep the room with cooled air. I think I hear a television inside, and while it occurs to me to ask whether I can have a look in, I worry that whatever I say will come out as some kind of sexual innuendo. For all I know, “Hey, I’m curious what your dorm looks like” in Chinese might translate to, “Hey, let’s get it on.”

To my knowledge, there are, unfortunately, no textbooks for double entendres.

Sometime after I get through the fish, I find some time to talk to Boss Fan, who explains that the little restaurant that’s oddly connected to our own is such because we actually rent the space out to them. The girl who works there (and had a spotless black dress on yesterday) is now wearing a sheer pink turtleneck of some sort, as she hefts dirty water out the back door of the noodle shop and dumps it into the alley. I really don’t understand how she stays clean.

For a moment I compare it to how our spiky-haired cook showed up this morning with his hair looking really styled, and with a nice, very fresh-looking shirt. Then again, those both went when the cooking began, even though “Spike” left his nice shoes on. It occurs to me that maybe these folks don’t have clothes other than their ―Sunday‖ outfit, which has to make do for everything.

I also get a chance to watch Boss Fan interact with the local police. I’m a bit startled when he sort of yells at them for their failure to notify him of some important deadline. Later, he explains that “they’re all good friends [of mine].” The idea of friendship in China sometimes strikes me as wonderfully simple: basically, make friends with everybody, and if possible, be good friends with all of your friends.

However, there are times when I’m convinced that Chinese friendship is ridiculously complicated. Those times usually involve people talking about their friendships and never being quite clear as to what “friend” or “good friend” means. Here is one potential schema that I have put together:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term used</th>
<th>Actual meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Friend”</td>
<td>I’ve seen the person around</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Good friend”</td>
<td>I know the other person’s name</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I’m friends with the other person
I’m close friends with the other person
(S)he and I are best friends

Today I also met one of the neighborhood girls, who plays near where the bosses hang out (in the “alley break room,” remember?). She looks about eight years old, has somewhat poofy hair, and lives in the complex next door to our restaurant. She gives me the English name that she was given in her English class—Mary—which is infinitely easier for me to remember than her Chinese name (which is something like “Jiang Rang.” But based on her accent could easily be “Liang Yang” or “Yang Lang” or any number of other similar things). At first, she is shy around me, especially after she tells me she’s learning English in school and I try grilling her on vocabulary. And then, the moment her friend comes over to play, she shouts, “Hey! I’m talking to a foreigner!”

This is a bit of a digression, but I wonder if anthropologists—especially those who do participant-observation—ever have a moment where they wonder, “Is there an easier way that I could obtain this information without spending an entire year living with this people?” I know I’m only on my second day of working at this restaurant, but I still question whether I’m actually learning anything significant that I couldn’t learn by simply interviewing one or two interviewees who more or less trust me. I suppose it’s too early to know.

I’m not supposed to be in the main dining area during peak hour, I learned, but at least Mrs. Boss told me nicely. I discovered this because once, when I was still out front during noonish, a customer asked one of our servers about what Chinese minority I belong to (“Na zu ren?”). Apparently he’d spotted me across the restaurant.

“Waiguo zu,” I said, grinning, which means “the foreign minority.”

“No, no, which minority group?” he hollered back. I guess he didn’t get the joke.

“The foreign persons minority group,” I said, again, trying to make it more obvious. Where did I learn that this was a popular joke? He looked puzzled.
Finally, identifying myself as belonging to China’s most populated minority group, A sort of “majority minority,” if you will. It’s the one that treats the other 55 minorities as “others.”

“You don’t look it,” he said.

“What would you have guessed?” I asked, but he didn’t quite understand me. I guess it didn’t matter. It was interesting enough to know that somebody thought I looked “ethnic.”

I’ve been enjoying the process of learning more about Chinese restaurants, too. For example, I’ve realized that it’s irritating when someone tries to change their order, even right after the server has put it in, because the cooks work so fast. Within twenty seconds after your order is first called in, it may already be in the pan. Stir fry orders in particular fly in and out of the kitchen within short minutes when our system is running well.

From talking to the two Bosses, I also learn that restaurants in China are assigned a “star” rating, based on their quality.

“How many stars is this restaurant, then?” I say. Boss Fan bursts out laughing.

“This isn’t even a half-star restaurant!”

There’s one other concept that I don’t quite know how to internalize at this point. Chef Pan eats using a bowl that he brought from home. When I ask him why he does this, he explains that he doesn’t like using the bowl and silverware provided by the restaurant. I soon notice that everyone has their own bowl-and-chopsticks tucked away somewhere in the restaurant: Kao has his stashed by my dishwashing station, Pan keeps his near where he chops vegetables, and the fuwuyuan girls leave theirs inside a refrigerator.

I once thought that my coworkers did this because they didn’t trust my dishwashing, but I realize that they simply don’t trust other people’s dishwashing, in general. Taking their cue, I’ve learned not to trust my own dishwashing, either—after all, who better to understand the disgusting state of the bowls than me? And so, I now have my own bowl, which sits next to
Kao’s, and I too take part in the after-meal ritual of us each washing our own bowl. Best of all, Mrs. Boss recently passed out special chopsticks for each of us, so we’re not constantly using the disposable ones that we give to customers.

I finally get a look at the menu at our restaurant. For some reason, the cover shows the word “Menu” in English, but it’s basically a classic Chinese bill of fare. The dishes are mostly in the 8-15RMB ($1-2) range, with a few in the 20-30RMB range, and then a precious few can be found for 40RMB and up. Drinks are inexpensive… 4RMB for a bottled soda, 4RMB for a beer, which is marginally more expensive than what convenience stores charge. The inside of the menu is free of both pictures and English, suggesting that this restaurant does not cater to foreigners.

Before leaving today, I realize that I didn’t do a good job explaining to my coworkers why I’ve come to work here. By three o’clock, I’m officially off work, but for the second day in a row, I haven’t actually left yet—which strikes them as really peculiar. “I’m just hanging out to chat,” I say, which earns me a panel of confused looks.

Profile: Spike

“Ni shi shenme ren?” I say to Spike. This question is, literally, “What kind of person are you?” but is commonly used to find out where someone is from (generally, in regards to which province in China). Granted, it’s a pretty rough way of asking.

“I’m a Chinese person. Haha. We’re all yellow-skins here.” He laughs, and it sounds just a little bit bitter. At some point in our chat, he says something that I miss, and then punctuates it with:

“Beijing is no good.”

“Where is it good, then?” I ask.

“Nongcun,” he declares. The countryside.
Which nongcun?” I say, smiling.

—Any nongcun!”

—How come?”

His response is too blurred for me to catch any verbatim quote, but it mostly incorporates a tirade against Beijing’s lack of clean air in comparison to the wondrously crisp-and- lovely inhales available back home. I tell him that I’d once lived for one night at a small village by the Great Wall, north of Beijing. He lights up.

—live by the Great Wall! In the Jiayuguan area.” And that’s the extent of my conversations with the spiky-haired chef; after this day, he moved onto, I assume, another place of work.

August 2, 2010, Monday (Day 3)

I arrive at work this morning to find the dishwashing tubs full of dirty water. Peering through the sparse, floating lather and small cockroach bodies, I can see some dishes shipwrecked within. Another stack of plates sits on the counter to my left, waiting for me to take care of them. I take a shallow breath, wait to get used to the smell, and dig in.

—Who asked you to wash these?” says Pan, who materializes behind me. I look down at the little tin trays that the cooks use in the kitchen to hold cut vegetables, and I try to remember if someone handed them to me, or if I just thought they looked like they needed washing. This is my first experience feeling like I‘m overdoing my job, and I start to wonder if my coworkers see me as a threat to the well-being of their employment, like I‘m some sort of rate-buster.

I get a similar feeling later, when Pan suggests that I wait until a large pile of dishes has piled up, so that I can wash them all yi kou qi – —in one breath.” Washing dishes in large batches means I can listen to music on my mp3 player while I work, which is something that Pan does as well. When the work you do is repetitive—such as washing dishes for a straight hour—music is an incredible help.
Previously, the scissors I used both to slice open fish bellies and to cut the ends off of vegetables were these disgusting, rusting war tools, like two heavy knives loosely bolted together. However, today they’ve been replaced with a sharp, shiny, and tight pair that actually has comfy red plastic where your fingers go. When I bring it to the alley to cut vegetable stumps, one of the chefs comments that I need to make sure to bring it back inside afterwards, lest we lose it again, and then Mrs. Boss will have more things to say.”

Speaking of change, I find that personnel undergoes even faster turnover than do knives and scissors. Today, Chef Spike has been replaced by someone named Tan, a youngish-looking guy with wiry chef arms. We’ve also acquired another fuwuyuan, a very young-looking girl named Jen. No one seems interested in formal introductions (or farewells, in the case of the suddenly-disappeared-and-never-see-again Spike); nor does it seem like Tan or Chef need any training, other than a few tips for how to read and write orders.

Profile: Qia

Qia, who has the family name –He,” is by far the quietest of the four fuwuyuan, and has been working here for the better part of a year. The few times I’ve tried to talk to her resulted in me shuffling awkwardly away from a blank stare. That said, she tells me she has an older sister who is also here in Beijing, working in a beauty salon. She says that she hasn’t done work in a salon, herself, which unfortunately—and knowing how Chinese salons try to portray themselves—may have to do with the fact that she isn’t conventionally attractive.

Qia, who is either nineteen or twenty (she has told me both) also has two younger sisters, who are still back home in Gansu. She often wears this pair of earrings that accentuate her far-west ethnic look—the jewelry looks like little vertical strings of round beads.

The one time I witnessed Qia express intense emotion was during an afternoon, when some customers entered the restaurant, but Mao and Pan didn’t offer to help, and rather told Qia to send the customers away, since it wasn’t dinnertime yet. Rather uncharacteristically, Qia had left the dining room in a huff.
August 3, 2010, Tuesday (Day 4)

—They’ve committed suicide,” says Auntie, grinning a little. The 9:00 am overnight smell of death heralds the sight of six shiny, unfocused fish-faces. They stare up at me from the sink, and I get started on my gutting and scaling routine. By the sixth fish I’ve actually developed a method, and manage to finish them off fairly quickly, although not without dousing myself in a spatter of scales and fish juices that mark me as, still, in-training. The stink that now follows me from room to room kidnaps my appetite for breakfast.

Today, as we while away the relaxed hour or two before the lunch rush, an early customer calls out to my boss. She says something about how I look odd.

—He’s an American Chinese,” says my boss.

—Ehh?” she says. —How’d you hook yourselves an American?”

—He lives nearby,” says my boss.

—Why’d he come here?”

—This is a good restaurant,” replies my boss quickly. Then, the lady turned to me.

—Where do you live?” she says.

—Uh, nearby,” I say, and laugh a little. With that, they begin speaking more quickly. I catch them talking about my height, and resolve to figure out how tall I am in centimeters. As Leslie Chang describes in her Factory Girls,¹ height really can amount to something of an obsession in this country.

During breakfast, I’m treated to another view of the job-hunting process from a third-person perspective. An older woman, entering the restaurant, makes a simple inquiry about openings, but after hearing about how long the hours are, she mutters, —Too long,” and leaves.

Mrs. Boss says something in her regional dialect, most likely a joke about the woman, and I laugh obligatorily.

→You understood that?” says Mrs. Boss, one eye opened wider than the other.

→He didn‘t,” says Tan, a sigh in his voice.

→I‘m asking him.”

→Mrs. Boss, even I didn‘t understand what you just said, so for sure he didn‘t, either.”

Thanks a lot, Tan—I‘m trying to be an ethnographer, here. Then again, I have to hand it to him and his deductive reasoning. The extent of how regional variants of Mandarin can differ is finally hitting me. I’m starting to understand why my study abroad roommate, two years back, was swearing about fangyan (dialects) in his sleep. I‘m sure this is the bane of every researcher who comes to this country and dares to engage any but the most learned. Tan actually sometimes translates what I say to the others, because for some reason he can comprehend me better than do our coworkers. I suppose this may be a product of his traveling more in the south of the country during his teenage years. Regardless, I wish everyone was as easy to talk to as him.

Over breakfast, when we have mantou buns, Chef Tan tears off tiny bits and munches on them while staring into space. In the background, Kao yells at the fuwuyuan to turn off the music on their cellphones¹; their “radio” interferes with his eating groove.

→In the summer,” says Tan, quietly, “I don‘t have as much of an appetite. All day, I don‘t feel satisfied, but I don‘t feel hungry, either.” I look over at Pan, who doesn‘t appear to be eating much at all. He never seems to eat much. My bowl is a giant compared to the one that holds his porridge.

Activity in the restaurant is nerve-wrackingly stop-and-go: one moment, all four of the girls are lounging by the counter, but when a customer enters, suddenly they‘ve teleported to different stations, pouring tea, showing the keren to their tables, and fetching menus. And then just as suddenly, we‘re back in a lull, and the girls are asking me random questions.

¹ Listening to music through your cellphone speakers is not uncommon in Beijing, where young people are often spotted holding their phone in front of them, tinny pop tunes blaring as they stroll down the street.
How many people do you live with?” asks Sue. For some reason, I feel like there’s a socially-acceptable answer to this question, and I hesitate.

“One other person,” I say, presently, and feel kind of spoiled for the fact.

Back in the kitchen at my post by the sinks, I find that I get a feel for what sells well at our establishment, simply based on what I’m washing off the plates. I also have a pulse for the hot items on a given day; for example, yesterday was a record day for fish sales. I’d asked Pan if there was a reason for the unusually high fish sales. He didn’t know of one, and I went back to washing fish plates.

The next most exciting moment of the day, at least for the fuwuyuan, is discovering that I’m taller than the upright refrigerator, which was once, I suppose, the tallest entity in the restaurant.

“How tall are you?” one of them says. “At least 180, right?” Later, I calculate my height, which comes out to 185 centimeters (6’1’’). I realize that the Chinese find 6’1’’ remarkable in the same way that Americans find 6’5’’ remarkable, except 6’1’’ isn’t actually that rare in Beijing, either. I can get on a bus and look over the heads to the other guys who are about 185cm, and there are almost always a few others. Maybe it’s just that men taller than 180cm don’t work in restaurants, much less as dishwashers. Before the issue is dropped, the youngest fuwuyuan celebrates the fact that I’m just 21, which means that I may grow more, yet. I feel a bit like a mascot.

I can’t help but notice that Kao smokes while he cooks, but then again, so does Mrs. Boss. Sometimes I catch Pan whistling, or listening to mp3s while he chops vegetables. These are, however, the least of oddities, as far as kitchen behaviors go—today, I watched Kao pick up some raw chicken off the floor and toss it back into the frying pan. It actually gives me a sense of satisfaction, that I can now confirm my friends’ restaurant fears. Along the same lines, I’ve learned that the oil used to make your stir fry has been used several times before, and will continue to be used for future stir fries. This is a fun tidbit of information for my friends who complain that “Beijing cuisine all tastes the same.”
After the busy 11am-to-2pm lunch hours, Tan and I find a little more time to converse. As if out of the blue, he asks me whether I am writing an essay based on the work that I’m doing. I consider this a good opportunity to tell him about my thesis and upon my doing so he gives me a sage smile.

“The answer to your question is very simple, really,” he says, as if my entire topic can be summarized in to one question.

“Some people work at a place like this because they want to do better for themselves, and it suits their personalities,” he says. “But me, I like freedom.”

Tan is contemplating opening up a fruit stand. He’s shyly mentioned this to me twice, today, and I’m not quite sure how to respond. I don’t even realize that he is serious about the idea until later, when I see that he’s left his chopsticks behind—the pair the restaurant gave each of us, for company use. It turns out he only came today because he felt it would be bad form not to show up once more to clearly explain his situation to Mrs. Boss.

“I just don’t want to be stuck in another month of working in a kitchen, with strictly-determined hours,” he explains. “So I’ll just forfeit what I would’ve earned these last few days and go.” Tan had only been here for three days, which is, to put it another way, 27 days short of payday.

“Everyone’s penniless, you know,” said Tan, before he left. “The question is just whether you’re penniless, or more penniless. It’s all the same.” I laughed appreciatively.

“Sometimes I find job-hopping quite fun, really,” he added.

“You mean the freshness of it?”

“No,” he said, and then seemed to space out a little. “The fun is in the chances. Maybe you fail or succeed. Whenever you try, those are your possibilities. But if you never try, you’ll never succeed.” He was starting to sound like a motivational poster. But maybe that’s just the kind of guy that Tan is. His friends feel like the fruit stall idea won’t go well. He’ll have to borrow money (about $1,500) to pay the deposit for the lot where his stall will stand, and if he fails at this venture...
Hey,” he said. "I might fail. But that’s okay.” With that, he gave me his phone number, described where I would find him in the future, and said goodbye.

Profile: Tan (Part One)

Twenty-five year old Chef Tan is difficult to place. In the space of three days, he goes from new guy to new confidante to guy-who-just left. Of course, when we first meet, it sounds like he’s here to stay.

—Are you short term or long term?” I ask.

—Long term,” he says, chuckling a little, "I’m not as lucky as you guys. I do this for a long time, just as I’ve always been doing it.” Tan goes on to describe how at another restaurant, where his friend works, there’s a dishwasher kid who sports glasses and only works in the summer, because he’s also going to college.

—It’s very yongqi,” says Tan. Courageous. —Courageous that he spends his school breaks like that, working to make money. I have a lot of respect for him, and for those like him. I mean, the parents send their kid to school, and… he could just as easily spend his free time messing around.”

Tan has a little brother here in Beijing, but for the most part, he came here because of his cousins. He’s from Sichuan, but has worked in Chengdu, Guangzhou, and Zhejiang for a while, before heading to Beijing. The word -eavalier” connotes, variously, -arrogant,” -gallant,” and -offhand,” and Tan is all of the above.

—How are your parents willing to part with both of their sons, especially with you guys so far from home?”

—Willing or unwilling,” says Tan in reply, —These questions are for those prosperous enough to ask them.”
When I ask him about income differences between Chinese cities, he responds by saying that money isn't usually on his mind, and that it's not that important to him. "Depending on the lifestyle you're after, saving may or may not be a big deal." At the same time, he mentions wanting someday to open a restaurant of his own, "a restaurant like this." According to his rough calculations, which involve some decades and the 20-40,000RMB needed to start a restaurant, he could earn enough in 10 years to retire. On the other hand, it doesn't look like my bosses are nearly ready to retire, even after 12 years in the restaurant business.

When I say that money isn't important to me in this job, either, but am rather out to acquire experience, to understand my coworkers, and then writing some about it, he half-jokingly wonders aloud if I am writing a *lunwen*, or thesis. Both surprised and relieved, I tell him my story, and my approach to this research project. He seems to approve of the "learn by doing" strategy, nodding in a way that is very comforting.

It's no surprise, then, that Tan rapidly becomes my main conversation partner, or what anthropologists call a "key consultant." On our second day after becoming acquainted, he tells me about how lots of kids come to bigger cities and then send money home. "They only keep a little pocket change for themselves," he says, his face serious. "It's really tough on them, a tragedy, especially for the eldest child in a family. In some areas of China, they might have six or seven younger siblings, so they leave home at fifteen. The money they send home helps their younger brothers and sisters get through school." We share a moment of silence before he speaks again.

"There are many of these types in China," he says, admiringly.

"Do you send money back too?" I ask, hoping that the question isn't offensive.

"No," he says. He doesn't seem bothered by my question or his answer. He adds that life isn't too bad for the people he just described, except for when they get sick, and have to spend all of their savings on hospital fees. When it takes you a month to save eighty dollars, falling ill ruins everything.
After Tan had left to pursue his fruit-selling business, and when he came up in conversation with the others, one of the *fuwuyuan* expressed that she wasn't too sorry to see him go.

—The way he talked was very… *zuyangzi,*” she said. *Zuyangzi* means to do something for appearance's sake, only.

**Profile: Jen**

Fifteen year-old Jen Yufei appeared at work on my third day at the restaurant. I hadn't seen her come in to apply for the job, so she must have done so in the evening.

My first experience learning anything about her was right before the lunch rush on that first day. She was whispering under her breath as she leaned by the counter.

—Back home… back home,” she chanted. Before I had a chance to inquire further, I was called back into the kitchen, and Little Jen would have to remain mysterious for a little while longer. What puzzles me about Jen is her tendency to usually be quite cheerful. On a couple occasions, we have pleasant conversations, where I learn, for example, that she once studied English for just one year.

More of a phone user than her coworkers, Jen asks me if I have QQ, which is the dominant instant messaging service in China. I give her my email address and MSN screen name, and she pockets the information happily. Jen dresses in laced shoes, and wears things like polka-dot shorts, which really stick out when contrasted with the girls' dark pants, slacks, or capris.

I learn quite a bit more about Jen on my sixth day at the restaurant, when once again she looks forlorn, the way she did when I first met her. She stares away from the rest of us, focusing on some spot in the blank oblique. She then blinks several times, and then buries her face in her arm, like an ostrich avoiding danger. When I ask her coworkers if she’s okay, they shrug her behavior off as her feeling tired that morning.
What's wrong?” I ask later, setting myself down across the table from Jen. She half-smiles and allows some time to pass.

“Fifteen,” she says, finally, in a dramatic hush so quiet that I’m not quite sure she’s actually replying to my question. She could just as well be talking to herself in a stupor.

“Fifteen,” she repeats, “And coming out to work. I want to go back.”

Shortly afterwards, she and I talk about the US, and the exchange rate between the two countries, and how you can get 6.8 RMB per US dollar.

“The renmenbi is so worthless?” she says, her mouth hanging open. In an attempt to explain an economical situation that I myself don’t quite understand, I talk uselessly about how a cheeseburger is only 1 USD at McDonalds. I try to describe the nature of work and income in the US. At the end of the conversation, I give Jen a dime, as a keepsake.

After the lunch rush, I notice Jen holding a few RMB in her hand. Apparently she had gotten a tip for making a delivery, which made her very happy. She talks about putting a hole through the money and wearing the bills around her neck, so she won’t lose it. I’m not quite sure what to make of that.

“Who invented money, I wonder,” says Jen. “If I had invented money, then I wouldn’t be working right now.” She giggles a little at the thought.

Later, Mrs. Boss joins the conversation, and we talk about why Jen has come here to work in the first place. They talk about how her mom thinks that she should work hard, and how her older sister is at school, which is being paid for by her mom. They discuss how it’s odd that Jen doesn’t also have her education paid for.

“Why such favoritism?” says Mrs. Boss, who’s tone has become quite motherly. She suggests that Jen consider taking night classes, so that she can both go to college and work at the same time. I point out that it’s possible but sounds difficult, but they’re not really listening to me, anyway. Every now and then, Jen does her bashful ostrich thing again, burying her face in her arm. It’s awfully difficult to understand what she’s saying when she talks into the table.
—Work hard, you'll make it,” says Mrs. Boss. She murms that Jen is a guai haizi (basically, a “good girl”) for sending money home to her family. Jen clarifies that the money gets sent to her grandmother—her laolao, or mom’s mom—who has been kinder to her than have her parents. Jen’s mom doesn’t give Jen money, and has a gambling issue. The father is one of those faraway types who don’t send any money home despite the family being in dire straits. Jen mentions another father figure, but from her description, he seems a poor surrogate at best.

—So after I call this dad, or call that dad,” she says, “I don’t know who to call dad anymore.”

—Her family is too complicated,” says Sue.

—I’m too complicated,” says Jen, who pouts hugely.

August 4, 2010, Wednesday (Day 5)

Not to be needlessly repetitive, but the first thing that hits me when I reach the restaurant is, once again, the Aura of Nasty that streams out of it. On the bright side, it never seems this foul after I’ve been in the restaurant for a while, which is probably because 1) the doors get opened and the lights come on, and 2) I get used to it. But until then, I endure the smell as I survey the stack of dishes, complete with congealing sauces. I can see scraps of food floating around inside my sinks, which were left plugged up overnight. Only later does it hit me that these are the working conditions to which this group has grown accustomed; I don’t think it about the time, because by Day 5 I’m used to it, too.

While washing dishes today, I think about how either Mrs. Boss or her sister wash dishes at night, and realize something: I’m dispensable. But so was the now-departed Chef Tan. The work that he left behind has been picked up by Mrs. Boss, who today has donned a Chef’s uniform, complete with a crepe paper hat. She has also begun doing some serious general cleaning, which included scooping handfuls of rotten gunk out of corners of the kitchen that I never realized existed. And as if to fully demonstrate her nenggan—her “can-do” character—she was also seen using a circular saw to cut a piece of wood for a new workbench.
This might be a question for the psychologists, but what incentive is there for the fuwuyuan to act urgently, to jump up when customers arrive, and the like? Are they worried about losing their jobs (which is unlikely)? Is it a matter of personal pride and integrity? Do they simply hope to stay on Mrs. Boss’ good side? And for that matter, what do the Mr. Bosses do? Today I saw Boss Kang doing some work in the kitchen, but he usually isn’t even around.

Mrs. Boss is also quite a teacher. As I prepare leeks, she comes by and shows me a way that is, in theory, less wasteful and faster. It basically involves cutting less off.

—‘This top part,’” she says, pointing to a battered green section that I would have thrown away, —‘This part, in fried rice, is especially xiang.” Fragrant. She laughs. —‘This is – experience! I did over 20 years of this work, and I’m already over forty, you know.” She remarks that the restaurant is 12 years old, and that that’s how long she’s been Mrs. Boss around here. Would she start another restaurant someday? —‘No, this one is worry enough.”

The roof is leaky, which I didn’t realize until today, when it started pouring outside. The restaurant staff deals with the roof fairly systematically. Since the leak is in one localized place in the kitchen, a large pot is placed there and sidestepped casually. Rain in Beijing can be pretty intense. Due to the deplorable sewage system, the rain puddles like crazy and effectively flooding large areas of streets, which makes bikes a handy way to get over the big, deep pools. It does cool the summer scorch, but it also shoos people indoors. From the front of the store I watch two men rush across the street, both huddled under a single lavender umbrella. A minute later, another man, sloshes down the road almost ankle-deep in brown water.

It looks like Chef Pan and Mao might be dating. I try subtly asking when this started, knowing that Mao’s only been here for a week or two, but they don’t really respond—which may be a function of me not knowing how to ask questions subtly and also clearly. The three of us spend some time during the break playing cards, joking around with Chinese dialects, and talking about what’s fun in Henan, where Chef Pan is from. The two seem pretty up-to-date with popular news and news, even if you can’t tell from looking at them.

It doesn’t become absolutely clear to me that they’re definitely a pair until about now. While I’d seen them flirting a bit in the last day or two, or at least talking exclusively and
laughing a lot, I wasn't sure until I watched Pan tenderly brush his hand down her back over lunch. That was a pretty good hint. Later, his arm was draped over her shoulders. And now, as we chat, Pan occasionally touches or almost outright fondles her breasts—while I'm sitting in front of them. Mao responds with stoic inaction.

Profile: Mao

Mao Yanhua, better known as Mao (or "Xiao Mao," where "Xiao" means "little"), is definitely the most extroverted one of the four fuwuyuan (waitresses) I meet while at 六圆阁饭庄 ("Liu Yuan Ge Fan Zhuang" or the "Six Round Pavilion Restaurant"). A sunny, glasses-wearing twenty-four year old, she hails from Hebei province, which is just south of Beijing. She's been working here for about a week, and has slightly rodent-like features that twitch when she asks me questions.

She's already completed three years of undergraduate study, which makes her by far the most educated member of the restaurant staff. She tells me that she has spent a total of ten years learning English from elementary school to high school, but like most Chinese college students, she has since forgotten everything but the very basics.¹

I tell her that she should practice with me, and despite her protests I try to jog her memory whenever we have a break, jotting down useful sentences on an order pad. On more than one occasion, I am impressed by the extent of how much English she remembers, even if very little of it is functionally conversational. Sometimes she teaches me some Chinese characters; at one point I learn the words for "ant" and "cockroach." "

Apparently in China, the fourth year of college is "optional," it being a type of practicum or internship period. Mao, who is majoring in Chinese, plans on going back to school next month.

¹ These basics include the single-word amalgam, "Hello how are you," as well as "Where are you from?" which is actually an enormously popular question to ask in Beijing. Potentially because the population in China's large cities is so famously varied, asking "Where are you from?" (or, actually, "Ni shi nali ren?" which literally translates to, "Of what place are you a citizen?") has become socially acceptable to ask of strangers.
but she isn’t really looking forward to it. She doesn’t know what she wants to do with her degree, claiming that she couldn’t be a writer because she doesn’t have enough tiancai, or talent.

―I’ll probably be a clerk, secretary, teacher, that sort of thing,‖ she says. ―Or maybe an editor.‖

In the restaurant, I get the feeling that Mao is perceived as more capable, and is given somewhat different responsibilities than the other younger fuwuyuan. Possibly because she knows that she won’t be in this restaurant forever, Mao also seems more motivated. One of her rare statements of frustration occurred when she delivered the following little joke, quoting a popular communist slogan:

―Serve the People’s Republic of China? Hah, more like ‘Serve the People’s Republic of China’s Currency’!‖ The joke doesn’t translate very well, but in the original language, it was a refreshing cultural criticism.

In regards to her home province, she says that there’s ―not much‖ that she likes about Hebei, and that she enjoys being on break, even despite having to work this many hours every day. Does she miss her family? ―Sometimes.‖

Profile: Pan

―How tall are you?‖ asks Pan, the twenty year-old cook in charge of preparation, cleaning, and washing. This is the first question that he ever asks me, and my response involves realizing that I don’t know how to convert 6’1’’ to centimeters. Pan, who is from Henan, is a bit on the short and chubby side, and wears squarish thick-framed glasses along with a quiet-but-careless personality. He’s usually seen wearing his paper hat horizontally over his nesty puff of hair, which in the back spills down his neck like some kind of hanging garden. His shirt is often unbuttoned down to the belly button, and his outfit is completed with green camouflage pants.

Our conversations are consistently sparse and awkward; despite us spending the most breaks together compared to anyone else, even on my fourth day at the restaurant he seems
dumbfounded that I’m working there. He does reveal that he has some family living in Beijing, such that he can visit them once in a while, but it occurs to me that “living in Beijing” could mean a one-or-two hour trip across the vast city, and that for low-income workers, the 2RMB one-way subway fare is not inconsequential.

One day, while we’re sitting in the alley during a break, Mrs. Boss walks out and scolds (the Chinese word for this, “ma,” can be translated to “being told off”) him for slacking, and for always being on his phone. When she leaves, I ask him if he’s reading news on his phone.

—Nope.”

—Well, what are you reading?”

—A novel.”

—Off the internet?”

—Yes.”

I consider this great progress as far as our conversations have been going until a little while later, when asks me whether Michael Jackson is popular in the US right now. I comment that MJ has gotten more popular of late, now that he’s dead. I ask Pan if he likes to dance or sing MJ songs (no and no), as well as whether he has any favorite Michael Jackson songs. He mumbles a couple of titles in Chinese, including one with “quanqiu” (“whole globe”) in it, and another with “shijie” (world), which means that his favorites are probably two out of the following: “Heal the World,” “You Rock My World,” and/or “We Are the World.”

—Do you like to play basketball?” he asks me, out of the blue.

—Oh, yes,” I reply, simplifying my answer. —Do you?”

—Yeah, I really do.” He actually smiles.

—When do you play?”
"I don’t really play now,” he says, and the smile drops. “I had more time back when I was still in school.” Later, when I pursue the issue with him, he says that he really doesn’t have time nowadays, and besides, there aren’t any courts nearby, which is a good point.

Pan has an interesting relationship with Chef Kao that I would approximate as a nephew/uncle kind of thing. Sometimes he’ll slap Kao on the shoulder for no apparent reason, and they like to pester each other during meals. On another day, I see Pan giving the older cook a rough back massage. When I volunteer to take over, he starts stabbing Kao in the kidneys with his bare foot, proclaiming that he has “soft feet.”

Pan also happens to be a belly roll-up man, which is the unofficial designator that some friends of mine have given to those Chinese men who like to roll their shirts up over their belly in the summertime. “Cooler this way,” he says, and happily stands out by the street.

In one of our final conversations, Pan asks me whether I know about the Undertaker, which is a little confusing, especially since he pronounces it “Ahndaker.” I eventually figure out that he’s talking about WWE (you know, the fine folks who brought the world “Wrestlemania”), which seems to be one of his favorite TV-watching pastimes. I pretend that I’m familiar with the show, and learn that he enjoys watching the translated broadcast on weekends and holidays. It’s surprising, I realize, and often uncomfortable, what the U.S. manages to export most efficiently.

Profile: Kao

Like Pan, Chef Kao is from Henan, which is a province south of Beijing. The older cook seems to run the kitchen, and I get the feeling that he’s been around for a long time. His face grins aptly through a forty year-old arrangement of dark wrinkles, all under a full swathe of oily, wavy hair. A Jackson Pollock’s worth of scars crisscross his arms, which show because the sleeves on his chef’s uniform have been torn off, which makes him look a little bit like a highschooler from the Eighties. This look is accentuated when he is smoking one of his daily twenty cigarettes, which he sometimes does while cooking (but that’s okay, Mrs. Boss does it too).
Overhearing me talk to Mao about her history of learning English, Kao tells me that the he and I can also converse in English. Within a day I've learned never to take him seriously. I also learn that not only can Kao and I not converse in English, we have trouble conversing in Chinese, too. The respective versions of Putonghua (i.e. "Common Speak," another way to say "Mandarin") that we use just don't fit that well; his seems to be a jumble of thick vowels, and mine has a certain reediness that marks me as "southern." Eventually I find that I can understand him, with practice, and that if I speak loud enough, he can understand me, too.

—Bring me back to the States with you," he says, once, in a classic Kao fashion. Later, he changes the subject to something a little more sincere.

—How much was your roundtrip ticket?" he says.

—Around 1500 US dollars," I respond, and he pauses for a little while.

—That's like 10,000 RMB!"

—Right. Yeah, almost exactly that." I'm impressed.

—So you can't really earn back the money for your ticket by washing dishes, then."

Then again, my conversations with Kao are almost always a little odd. For example:

—What are these balls?" I ask Kao, pointing to a plate of brownish things that look like a cross between matzo and falafel.

—Hah?"

—What are these things?"’

—They're balls."

On the sixth day of my work at the restaurant, Kao and I have our first long conversation, while sitting on the curb in front of the restaurant. Measured in cigarettes, we speak for the better part of an hour, talking about the possible opportunities he might someday have abroad, how he
makes 2200RMB a month (over 300USD, which is double what servers get) and how he manages to save 1800 of it. I tell him that folks can't save like that in the US (but then again, I admit to myself that Chinese people in America come pretty close).

—Why didn't you look for work in Hong Kong?" asks Kao.

—I like it in Beijing."

Other things we talk about include how long it takes to fly to the US from China (fourteen hours), compared to how long it takes to get around China by train (which commonly involves one- or two-day rides for longer trips). Kao says he’s willing to teach me how to make some simple dishes. —I’ll write down the recipes for you." Have I been to Taiwan yet (no)? Is Hong Kong or Beijing better (I don’t know)? Are there more cars in Beijing than in the US (getting there)? How much are cars in the US (depends)? How much would a Buick cost, then (not sure)? Does he want to get married (yes, and he’ll find an American wife)?

When Kao talks about his home in Henan, he seems to settle a little. He likes the nongcun (countryside) better, and he gets to visit each year during the Spring Festival (aka Chinese New Year).

—The air is better. But now, even the nongcun isn’t as nice anymore, now that there are roads everywhere. It's becoming just like the city." For Kao, back when rural and urban areas remained kind of different, there was still a point.

August 5, 2010, Thursday (Day 6)

I have just been fired from a Chinese restaurant, where for six days I worked as a dishwasher. I’d just been talking to Chef Kao outside and then suddenly Mrs. Boss called me in, and…
Nothing about the rest of the day was abnormal. I had parked my bike at the side of the restaurant as always, said hello to Boss Fan, who was doing some reading, and then went inside, where it was already lit. The morning was business as usual – no fish to clean, just some dishes swirling in the sink. After swallowing my way through the odor and taking care of them, I noticed Xiao Qia washing her hair over a pail of water, very carefully and very slowly. The end result was surprisingly laudable: both Qia and Mao’s hair looked especially flowy today.

The girls wash their hair in the area between the dorm and the noodle restaurant connected to ours. Under that awning, a variety of clothes (belonging to any number of people) hang to dry. Even Chef Pan dries clothes from it, despite not living here. He fishes his cloth shoes out from what I thought was a like a trash heap, and mutters, “Still not dry, eh.”

The girls’ dorm, some of which is publicly visible to anyone standing in the alley beside our restaurant, is always dark and a bit forbidding–looking during the daytime. Other than beds and fans, several pairs of shoes are visible under the bottom bunks, where a few buckets (possibly holding belongings) can also be seen. The mattresses look really thin. There’s also a TV by the door, near one of the beds.

When you walk into the restaurant from the side door, you go through the mini kitchen that is used by the sister restaurant. Going a little further, you’re brought to a tile floor, which is a crossroads: left takes you into the dining area, right to the bigger VIP room as well as the bathroom, and straight on is the kitchen. The walls are covered in roughly-grouted white tiles, many of which are cracked, as if someone did a drunken baseball bat dance through the halls.

I’m reminded, as I look around at the tarnished, greasy, almost “fungusy” metal shelves and racks, that this restaurant is twelve years old and was probably not put together with the cleanest components to begin with. The off-white ceiling, which is comprised of slats, looks like it was nailed together by a family with a do-it-yourself manual (which is probably not far from the truth). There are pieces missing from the kitchen floor tiles, which are larger and a red-brown color.

Next to the main kitchen area is my little dishwashing hall, which contains a pile of junk on the left side, beside the plank of sheet metal on which dirty dishes get placed for me to wash.
Under the plank are the big tubs, one for organic waste ("slops") and one for the non-organic (like disposable chopsticks, napkins, or broken glass). Above my work area is another plank of ultra-corroded metal with some newspaper pasted over it. That’s where recyclables are stored, until the recycle-guy comes along, counts them (so he knows how much to reimburse our restaurant), and takes them away.

This is one lesson I’ve learned about work in China: there’s always a less desirable job. It might be gross and demeaning to be a dishwasher, which basically requires no skill whatsoever. However, someone else has the job of scooping up all the slops that I dump out and let rot in the Beijing kitchen heat, in order to put them in a super tub that sits in the back of his van. This makes the recycle-guy’s job seem like a cakewalk—all he has to do is lash all the bottles onto his giant cart (which is basically a big raft of wood resting on a piece of metal that has been somehow twisted into the shape of a tricycle) and drive it away.

On the right side of my dishwashing area is a cleaner rack of metal, where all the "clean" plates, dishes, and bowls go after I’m done with them. Today my extra job is to clean all the dead cockroaches off of that surface, which involves rinsing a lot of dishes and wiping off their undersides. I’ve become strangely comfortable with cockroaches.

My sinks are my babies, of course. The left sink holds the dirty dishes after I’ve scraped off the bits of paper and slops and cigarette ash. That’s also where I put the soap, which is an odd, clear detergent that seems to contain something substance that gives it a slimy, tendril-like quality. Whatever it is, it cleans like crazy, cutting through grease before I even have a chance to wipe the plate. Wiping is done with a dishrag that is more holes than rag, and then the plates are dropped into the sink on the right, which is (initially) full of clean water. Once the dishes are lifted from that sink, they should be clean.

Both sinks drain into a putrid trough that needs to be occasionally emptied out of rotting food pieces and other unspeakable, oddly-black chunky objects. At normal Chinese eye level (where my sternum is) there’s a peeling sticker that reminds me in two languages that “WATER SAVING IS THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR EVERYBODY.”

1 How hot is this heat? Hot enough that when I go out into the 90F outdoor weather, it feels refreshing
Across from my dishwashing station are the rice cookers and accompanying stacks of bowls. That's also where the service window is. Through the service window you can see a glimpse of a real world of restaurant and outside, as well as what time it is by the clock on the opposite wall. Through that window come order slips as well as calls to "hurry up on the braised fish," and through that window we send large and small bowls of rice, along with hurried-up braised fish. Next to the rice cookers, there's also a refrigerator full of petrified things that were once alive.

The actual kitchen is not a room as much as it is a small network of walkways. Going roughly from right to left, there is Pan's chopping station, the vegetable storage area, the sinks where I clean fish, the racks where vegetables are dried, the two burners (which, from the way that flames leap out of them, are a little like a porthole to the center of the earth, or perhaps hell), the "island" with all the sauces and spices, the auxiliary cooking sink, the fridges with fish and meat, the pantry-like shelves with canned and bagged goods, and the new vegetables sitting by the side door. Outside of the side door is our alley, where construction workers walk, where I prepare vegetables for washing, where we sit on little crates and take smoke breaks, and where a couple of reed brooms lie.

The dining area, where I spend the least time, sports white walls, faux wood mantles, and salmon-colored tile floors, stuck together a decade ago. The tablecloths are a regal orange-gold, and the tables and chairs have a professional, dark varnish. Fans line the walls, pointing curiously downwards, so that only three or four tables in the place get any cooling. The wall features a number of Chinese paintings, each with the classic floral or bird-and-tree brush designs and some small Chinese text. An air conditioner in the far corner stands unused.

By each seat is a cup-saucer-and-chopsticks table setting. Some bamboo stems swirl in a vase on the counter, where money is processed, and where extra napkins, chopsticks, and matches are available to those who request them. Of course, close to the kitchen sits a fish tank, on which are stored extra cups and saucers; next to it is the customer sink (complete with grody
little soap bars, but hey, free soap bars). Finally, there are the two refrigerators containing beer and drinks. On the shorter fridge are teapots and hot-water jugs. And that’s the restaurant.

Breakfast here often involves a light cucumber salad, mixed with peppers. We also often get zhou rice porridge (which is kind of like predigested rice) and mantou steamed buns. On good days, the mantou may contain a brown sugar filling.

Today, I overhear that we’re looking for someone who can help out Mrs. Boss, who has been strapping on an apron and doing a lot of cooking work ever since Chef Tan left. A friend of hers brings in a potential new cook, who has gelled-up hair and darker skin. He sticks around for a little bit, but later takes his things, and leaves. Did we scare him away?

I think about how we all stared, just like folks stared when I walked into their restaurants looking for work, last week. I think I finally understand why we stare. It’s because there’s nothing better to do, and there’s no social rule that says that we shouldn’t stare. So when I sit in the ally tearing off the tough bits of bean pods, and you walk by, I may or may not be checking you out. It’s much more likely, however, that I’m staring because I’m bored and it’s what we do around here, even if you’re not that interesting to look at.

And then I hear that they’ve found someone to wash dishes at night. None of my coworkers seems to know any details about how they found someone with my schedule in reverse.

I don’t have much time to think about it, because Mrs. Boss decides to take that moment to show me how to shayu—kill a fish—when it hasn’t already died overnight. She goes to the tank and fights with, seemingly, all the fish at once, in order to wrestle one out of the water. Once it’s firmly in her hands, an urgent look comes on her face and she runs to the threshold in the kitchen area, raises the fish above her head, and then piledrives it onto the floor with a grunt, which is muffled by the slap-crunch sound of the fish’s body.

―Haole,” she says, looking away, which is my cue to pick up the still-jerking fish and carry it to the sink. It still twitches after I scale it, so I pull out its gills, which lets loose a heavy flow of red. And then there’s the part where I stick my right hand into the still-wriggling body, cup my fingers around the organs, and then lift them out. Still the empty corpse shakes
periodically, and continues to do so even after LBN cuts a few slices into both sides, for sauce-absorption purposes. It finally stops moving when she bashes its head over the sink several times, so hard that I think a fish head is going to fly off.

“I’ll tell you what,” she says to Jen, “If you can sell four fish tonight, then I’ll give you a 10RMB bonus.” She sticks out four long fingers as she says this, and I can’t help observing that her face has a slightly fishy look, with an upper jaw that sticks out unnaturally far and brown teeth that stick out skullishly. Mrs. Boss usually wears her hair tied back, which makes her long face look longer. While she dresses in a girlish polo tee and sneakers, she remains an imposing figure, sweeping in and out of rooms, with very quick hands. In contrast, her sister (―Auntie‖), is a little shorter, wears her hair in a cropped perm, has small, non-threatening eyes, but is also less outgoing. Auntie is usually dressed in floral outfits that almost always have a brown theme—if you can imagine brown floral.

It was near the end of the day when Mrs. Boss called me in from the front of the restaurant, where I was talking to Chef Kao. Walking inside, I found the entire staff waiting there. It was one of those moments where you sweep over every minor detail really quickly: everyone crowded around Mrs. Boss, as well as a new guy standing behind them. The guy is dark-skinned, not bad looking, has longish hair, and isn’t very tall. Punk, I thought.

“I’m very sorry, Xiao Wang,” said Mrs. Boss, using the ―xiao‖ honorific, which suggests that the speaker is older. She bowed a little, but was smiling through her apology, and some naïve part of me remained in denial of what she was about to say.

“It’s okay,” I said, but she wasn’t done.

“It’s because you can’t do nights and weekends, so I have to wash dishes then, and it’s really too tiring, really,” she said, and that was when I realized that when they said that they found someone to wash dishes at night, they meant ―at night, also.‖

Really sorry,” she continued, “I hope you aren’t angry, but I’ll still give you money for the week.”

But I don’t need your money,” I said, softly, dazed.
"Chah!" she said, her brow furrowing and with one hand half-raised. She was already heading to the money drawer, from which she withdrew 110 RMB. I took this feebly, and found that I had trouble looking my coworkers in the face.

―But you can still come visit us, and make friends," she said. I nodded numbly, said something along the lines of, "It's okay," and then collected my water bottle from the kitchen. I didn't bother to take care of my personal bowl or chopsticks.

―Bye," I said, and the group chorused a farewell.

As I made my way out the back exit, my mind started calculating things I would have done had I had more time…

Like making macaroni and cheese for my coworkers.

―Do you guys eat cheese?" I asked, once.

―Depends on how you fix it," replied Pan.

Like taking pictures with Jen. Only today she'd said, "Tomorrow then, around 9:30 in the morning, we'll do our photo shoot. I want to put them on QQ, so my friends can see."

Like learning how to cook from Kao. "At the end of the month," he'd said, "I'll write down two recipes for you, with how much you need of each ingredient, and how to prepare them, and…"

But I didn't really have time to dwell on it. Walking out into the alley where the bosses sometimes sit, I was flagged down by one of the neighbor girls, Mary, who had been waiting to play cards with me. She and her friend, both around 9 years old, sat me down and had me play something that they called "trains." I found it hard to concentrate on the game or even on my own thoughts, and so I played along in a half-conscious kind of state until, finally, Mary and I came to some sort of a draw, and I explained that it was time for me to go.

Biking home, I dwelled on the feeling of being fired. It has since occurred to me, that in doing such research, the wages that I seek are not renmenbi, but relationships, and trust. Even beyond idealism, successful participant observation practically requires getting to know a people
group over a period of time. Washing dishes was the job that allowed me to do my real job. Getting paid cash was just a fun bonus to my actual pay, which was getting to know my coworkers. And so I went home and morosely listened to the radio chant, “I could really use a wish right now, wish right now, wish right now...”

I also ate most of a small container of doughnuts and wondered if I would find any solace in hard liquor.

In the end, it was a tweet from my older sister Victoria that brought me the catharsis that I was craving. I had previously told her about my experiences in Beijing, and emailed her some rough field notes. “I’m struck by how unusually friendly and curious people in China are,” she posted. “I wish more Americans knew that there’s so much more to these people than their censored internet and cheap goods.”

I brooded for a while, there on the floor of the apartment. Victoria understood exactly what this is research is all about.
August 6, 2010, Friday

Though freshly unemployed, I really don’t feel like pounding the streets for new work today. I decide to visit no-longer-Chef Tan at his new fruit stand. Over the phone, he’d given me some directions on how to get to his neighborhood, which is more or less only a bus ride away from where I live.

As seen from a map, Beijing is organized by concentric ring roads, with Tiananmen Square and the massive Forbidden City at the center of the city, which is intersected by one or two superhighways that everyone tries (unsuccessfully) to avoid because they’re perpetually jammed up. In theory, the closer one gets to the city, the areas are busier, the real estate is hotter, and the more there is to do. However, Beijing has more than one area that is densely populated and busy; one of these hubs can be found in the northwest of the city, which has been nicknamed “University District” for fairly obvious reasons. Another major hotspot is Chaoyang District in the northeast, which houses most of the city’s clubs, a long bar street, and some high-end shopping venues. In other words, it is where you go if you miss seeing white people—it’s the Foreigner District.

I live on the outskirts of Chaoyang, such that I could head one block towards or away from the city center and find myself, respectively, in the company of either expatriates or local folks. As the bus takes me further into local-folk territory, I think about how transportation in this city is like riding a river that randomly splits off into smaller rivers, which split off into streams and then little trickles. I think about how the turns our bus just made have taken us into some seriously trickly terrain. The roads are narrowing, there is a somewhat higher incidence of bike-drawn carts and tuk-tuks, and a much higher concentration of dust suspended in the air.

Getting off the bus at the 东八间房 stop, I’m hit with a sensation I hadn’t had in some time, where I suddenly feel overwhelmed with the need to start walking, to look cool and normal, and seem like I actually belong in this part of town. It’s the sensation of being a stranger.
When you get off the bus, go to the Chengdu Xiaochi (Chengdu being a major city in the south of China, Xiaochi meaning, literally, “little eats”) and mention my name,” Chef Tan had said. Apparently he used to work there, and those still working there know where he is now.

After some confusion as to whom I’m talking about (“I’m looking for, uh… Tan… Tan something…”), the waitress who welcomed me into the restaurant confirms not only that she knows where he is, but that she will take me to him. Her boss readily gives her leave to do this—all it takes is for her to invoke the friend clause—“I have a friend here, I need to help him out”—and the answer is a shrugged “yes.” As Chang suggested in Factory Girls, even in the worst working situations, you always end up making time to help friends out, whether your boss likes it or not.

“How did you end up in Beijing?” I say, after a brief period of silently walking down the dusty street. She says simply that she’d followed siblings here, and then adds quite happily that Chef Tan is her little brother, which in this case actually means that he is her younger male cousin. The Chinese seem to enjoy simplifying the family designators as much as possible, which is unsurprising since the word for “cousin” changes based on whether that cousin is male or female, younger or older, on your father or mother’s side, or is related by blood or by marriage, and these designators sometimes shift, depending on what part of China someone is from.

“I’ve basically have always been working as a fuwuyuan,” she says. The Chengdu Xiaochi wasn’t her first restaurant in Beijing. She also seems fairly confident that her “Brother Tan” will succeed as a fruit-seller, despite his saying before that everyone was telling him not to do it.

“He made 400RMB yesterday,” she says, her eyes widening for a moment. This is an impressive sum, compared to the 60 or 70RMB daily wage he would be making as a chef.

The cousin takes me down a small side street, which turns out to be a surprisingly bustling community. Short of a dance club or a karaoke bar, this neighborhood has pretty much everything, including more than one fruit stall. We find Tan’s a little further down the street, and I realize that it’s not really a stall but an actual storefront, which explains why it cost him so
much to get it. It remains surprising to me that he was able to come up with some $1500 of lent money within a matter of days. Across from his store I notice a restaurant, a market, a barbershop, and a bakery, along with some stores I can’t identify. I tell him that I’m impressed with his store, and with the community.

—he’s just a little place, really, with just this one room,” he says, wiping his hands nervously on a dishrag. He points me to the small, triangle-shaped slice of a room that juts out the back of his store. Inside the room, a bed stands on its edge, propped against the wall. The rest of his store is like a concrete box; fruit lays, rather sparsely, on some tables set out in front of it, and a rafter of sorts has been set up over our heads for storage purposes. It means I have to duck a lot to move about his store.

—Careful,” says Tan, smiling, casting a quietly happy glance about his new place. —I can string a clothesline across here,” he muses, presently, and then gets interrupted by a potential customer. When I’d just arrived, Tan had persuaded me to put down my bag and sit, and then proceeded to take a section of watermelon out of the refrigerator and cut it up for me, his cousin, and himself. Rarely have I had such crisp and sweet melon.

Ultimately, I am most struck by the community in this neighborhood. Laughing families stroll down the dirty street, into which we blithely spit our watermelon seeds. I watch a little girl come up and tease Tan about something in a dialect I can’t understand. A woman purchases some grapes and tells him to —keep the change,” which is something you almost never hear in China. It’s beautiful. But for Tan, this new place simply represents freedom, even though he may be losing money right now. On his first day, he’d spent 1000RMB on fruit and sold 500RMB of it; on his second, he bought 600RMB worth, and sold 400RMB—so when his cousin had said that he’d made 400RMB, she’d been rather overoptimistic.

—I haven’t quite learned how to work this trade yet,” he says calmly, —So starting out is bound to be this way for a while. I think—I think this is okay.” He explains how some waste (of bad fruit), some skill (as in marketing), and some knowledge (like waking up at 4am to get the best fruit) is involved in fruit selling. Again, he casts a gaze over his store—with its sink, fridge, table, cash register, small stool, bed, and fruit tables—and somehow looks very content.
When we have some time between customers, Tan tells me he feels that Chef Kao (back at our old restaurant) is selling himself short by settling for 2200RMB a month, even after being there for so long. When he began, Tan had somehow negotiated a starting income of 2500, promising also to revamp the menu and set up some attractive pictures in the restaurant. Of course, he is here, now.

After some time it occurs to me that the front of his store is essentially a big square hole, with just some bamboo blinds rolled up at ceiling-level. He explains that the actual doors to his place are these two large glass slabs that are sitting in an alley across the street. I’m not sure how he manages to move those each night and morning.

―What do you do in the winter, to avoid the cold?” I say, doubting that those slabs can be very insular. He responds with a story about how back in his restauranting days, he once worked in conditions where he slept beside a fishtank that had actually frozen through. I mutter an appreciative expletive.

―You know,” says Tan, before I leave, ―Our meeting – it really has yuan.” Destiny. I only worked at that restaurant for one or two days, and then I met you.” Yuan is short for yuanfen, which nearly translates to “destiny” as Americans know it, but it is better described as the idea that every meeting is arranged. Two years ago, I’d gone around asking people what they thought of the yuanfen concept and found that the vast majority of respondents—cabbies and college students alike—believe that it is real, that some unnamed, higher something arranges the relationships that we make, whether they are between two people, or between a person and an object, or even between a person and a given place.

―For example,” someone had said to me, “Clearly, you have yuanfen with Beijing,” as if he knew that I would return to the city three times in the next two years.

*     *     *     *

Later in the afternoon, I have plans to meet with Professor Ferchen at a popular bar-restaurant that serves western food in the University District. Incidentally, Ferchen was the one who advised me when I was doing my rough not-quite—research” on yuanfen as a part of his sociology class while I was studying abroad here two years ago.
When he arrives, he sweeps in and pays for my milkshake.

―Cause I'm the teacher who is earning money, that's why,” he says. “I mean, you're earning money too, but not much.” He chuckles, knowing how low "low-wage” goes for, in Beijing. As we talk, it is clear that he has thought a lot about China’s migrant movement, too. He tells me the story of these girls he'd met, who were working at a bar. One of them used to work somewhere even less attractive (as an elevator operator, which is exactly what it sounds like), and the two originally came from somewhere they considered the least attractive of all—the farms where they grew up.

Ferchen feels that the most intriguing question may lie with the connection-relationship aspect of these migrations, how folks seem to show up in a place like Beijing simply because they know someone, possibly someone who came first, such as an extended family member, which makes me think of Tan and his "big sister.” He is surprised when I mention how often it looks like folks just walk into a restaurant without a prior connection, much like the way I found my own albeit short-lived restaurant job.

Before we part, he advises me to visit the Qinghua [Tsinghua] University campus, which has a bunch of people who are studying this topic.

That night, I head to a movie theater in Chaoyang to watch Tangshan Da Dizhen (known internationally as "Aftershock"), which has recently gotten a lot of buzz for being extremely moving in its telling of the 1976 Tangshan earthquake and its aftermath. In the movie, there is a part where a father discovers that his daughter will not be graduating from medical school, and says, "Even college graduates can turn out to be worthless.”

Around me, the mixed crowd of Chinese and foreigners laughs heartily, but as someone researching just how worthless someone’s college education can be in this country, and being myself a senior in college, I find that the laughter and blood has drained from my face.

August 9, 2010, Monday
As I gaze about the interior of this new restaurant, it occurs to me that getting fired has gotten me a little flustered. The methodology of this study had been clearly and simply designed: one month working 40-hour weeks in a medium-sized Chinese restaurant, building relationships with my coworkers in order to gain insight on the low-wage migrant class that they represent. Until now, it has seemed quite clear to me that without that contiguous month of work I would not succeed in gaining said insight.

But now I’ve been let go from my first restaurant, which is a little like the surprise final spring freeze sweeping a garden just one week after the strawberry plants have begun germinating (I would compare it to a miscarriage, but that would be a little extreme). Incidentally, the Chinese have a funny way of saying that someone has been fired: he’s been chao youyu, or—stir-fried like a squid.”

I’ve been chao youyu, which is why I am now sitting in this Chongqing-style restaurant where the owner and his family are using a (to them) native and (to me) unintelligible fangyan to loudly discuss whether or not to let me work there. At certain points it sounds like they’re talking about how much they should pay me. I imagine what it would be like to wash dishes and gut fish in this place, possibly learning a bit of this central Chinese dialect of theirs. The establishment is decorated with plastic chili pepper hangings, and I notice that almost every one of the items on their menu involves noodles in some kind of fluorescent-orange spicy broth.

Ultimately, all that the family business can offer me are two hours of work every day in the afternoon, for which I will receive 15RMB (around $2) and lunch. Unfortunately, this is generous in the least helpful way—can’t you see that the currency I seek is your heart?—although I am a little curious to see just how spicy Chongqing noodles might be. It only takes a moment to internalize that this gig will not produce the research that I need, and I take my leave with a polite, I’ll kaolu this for a little while and give you a call.”

In one afternoon I’ve already visited a whole row of restaurants, and I’m becoming very comfortable both with the script of looking for work and with getting rejected. Around two-o-clock I’d headed out on my bike—this time on my own—in the opposite direction of where I
found the last restaurant, which meant that I was gradually biking deeper into more and more upscale territories, near the expatriate neighborhoods.

I reasoned that, perhaps, a larger restaurant would be able to hire someone like me who only worked weekday daytimes. You know, a restaurant that could afford to allow a weird, mostly dispensable foreigner hang around from 9am to 5pm. This wasn’t the case for almost all of the establishments I had seen so far, which were mostly Chinese places, plus a few fusion-types and a couple Japanese restaurants (lined up on what you might call a “Japanese street,” or a row of Japanese eateries and stores all in one place). I also learned that the middle of the afternoon is, contrary to my guess, a fairly bad time to look for restaurant work. From two-to-five, restaurants aren’t very busy, but that means that the manager is probably not around, and inquiries about work will tend to earn you a “come back later” reply.

These are some of the other responses I receive to my inquiries:

- A lone waitress staring unfocusedly at me and saying, deadpan, “We’re not looking for new workers.”
- Getting asked about where I’m from (“the U.S.”), where my jiazhu (family background) hails from (“Jiangxi, Jiujiang”), and where I’m living right now (which is code for “do we need to provide you with housing?”).
- Murmured and/or disbelieving comments about my height.
- Being asked to wait until the manager came back. I sat pathetically by the door for half an hour before sheepishly taking a business card and leaving the restaurant.
- A manager slowly looking me up and down, dwelling uncomfortably on my lower half before stating, “Sorry, no openings.”
- Being turned down because I didn’t want to work weekends or nights.
- Being turned down because I couldn’t stay long term.
- Being turned down because I am not a woman.
Sometimes I was offered a courteous cup of water as I waited, but in each case I was ultimately turned away. In retrospect, I may have found more openings if I had opened myself up to other kinds of work besides just dishwashing and busboy work—apparently you can offer yourself for *zashi*—miscellaneous tasks.

And then there was the particularly awkward seafood place, where upon entering and announcing my search for work I was inspected by a pack of giggly hostesses, all but one of whom presently rushed off to the opposite corner of the restaurant lobby and began to whisper loudly to each other. After some contemplation of this situation, I reluctantly considered that this may have occurred based on my general look. I think back to a time, two years ago, when I was riding the subway in Beijing while studying abroad; a girl across the aisle randomly asked me how old I was, and she responded to my reply with, "Oh, that's a pity." The feeling I had at that moment seemed to be reprised here.¹

After some conversation, the (tall, prim, and queen-like) manager of this particular restaurant offered me a job as an English-speaking waiter, but withdrew the offer when I reiterated when I was willing to work. I guess Anglophone foreigners don’t really eat seafood dinners… for lunch.

And now I am at Lucky Street, which is two- or three-block-long row of upscale restaurants. I really didn’t think that I’d make it to this part of the city, which is a ten-minute bike ride from my apartment. Nearby this street sprawls a luxury-brand shopping mall called "Solana," which I have saved as my last resort for job possibilities. I had figured that when I got

¹ Incidentally, my physical composition seems to match a number of idealized aesthetic characteristics valued in China. For example, I am relatively tall, my facial shape is elliptical, I have the ambiguously desirable "southern look," and my eyes are on the large side with *shuangyanpi* or "double eyelids" (which can be unhelpfully explained as having lower lipid content in the area around my eyes, which corresponds to the upper eyelid possessing what appears to be a "fold"). On the downside, I have an unattractively tan complexion and an unimpressively flat nose, and sometimes I wear long sleeve shirts over my cargo shorts, which the locals tell me looks awkward.

I bring up this topic in order to consider whether in China, the possession of conventional physical attractiveness more obviously scales proportionately with one’s estate than in the U.S. Put more simply, do more expensive restaurants hire more classically attractive wait staff, or at least emphasize their dressing- and making-up? From the sample of restaurants I’d visited today, this started to seem like a real possibility. Might there be a "Rice Price Index," wherein a given establishment’s pricing for a bowl of rice can be negatively correlated with the conventional attractiveness of its employees?
this far, the restaurants would be too big and particular about the folks that they hired. I’ve actually eaten at a few of these restaurants—two of them recently—which makes this process a little surreal. I skip those two, and get to work with my now-polished script:

*Nihao.*

*Huanying guanglin! Jiwei?*  
*Uh, wozai yinpin.*

*Oh. Shenme gongzuo?*

*Xiwangong, fuwusheng dou xing.*

*...*

It turns out that I don’t really look like someone who works in dishwashing, which apparently is a position most often filled by older folks (i.e. the less fresh-faced oldsters who shouldn’t be filling orders). I am turned away by most of these restaurants as well, many of which feature interesting new twists on the “help wanted” process. At one “German bakery” I leave my contact information and desired shift. At a few others, the restaurant has posted a phone number for job-seekers to call. After my initial terror of looking for work over the phone, I am delighted to discover that until the conversation steers into more complicated topics, I can pass for a native Chinese speaker with a bit of a Taiwanese/Hong Kong accent.

One person answers the phone and asks me how tall I am.

*Um, around 185cm.” This is a calculation I had to do at home.*

*Wow! You must be very tall, then!”*

In the end, my best and only real possibility was at a restaurant whose name translates roughly to Beijing East-Country Old-Jade Balcony, which was one of the first restaurants that I checked out. I hadn’t gotten much farther than the front door, where I was accosted by a manager and a younger staff member, both of whom wore white shirts and ended up giving me a mini-interview. To my surprise, the manager, who I learned to address as Dao, didn’t mind the odd work hours that I had requested, and sent me off by saying that he just needed to confer with the management about what to do with me. I was to call him sometime after 9pm that night.

Before I left, he jokingly asked me if I had any other qualifications.”
―What?‖

―You know, what else can you do?‖ he said, showing off a thin line of white teeth as he rocked his head back a little. I sputtered, not sure how to go with the question, and he continued, ―You know, if you can dance, or do martial arts.‖ I respond that I have at least some experience with both, incidentally, and he laughs.

And so, that night, Dao picked up his phone and expressed that yes, I could come in tomorrow and begin work for 600RMB ($85) per month. I was to show up before 10:00am, wearing a white dress shirt, dark pants, and dark shoes.

I felt strangely ecstatic.

August 10, 2010, Tuesday (Day 1)

―Oh, you’re the American, right?‖ says one of the waitresses, who welcomes me to have a seat and wait a while until Manager Dao (who hired me yesterday) arrives. This gives me about twenty awkward minutes to watch the large wait-staff sweep, mop, and put out table settings, and also survey the main dining area on the first floor of the restaurant.

Other than two round tables in the corner, the floor features a matrix of square tables covered by yellow or red tablecloths which in turn are covered by a glass piece. The seven-piece table settings at these tables are comprised of an inverted teacup on a saucer, chopsticks, a chopsticks stand, toothpicks, bowl, and spoon, all set in a fairly consistent arrangement. I later learn that the distances between objects are measured in finger widths. This restaurant—Nanguo Ziyu Xuan or 南国紫钰轩—looks more “arranged” than did my previous restaurant (even the alcohol in the refrigerator looks carefully organized), and as I sit on the ornamented wood chair, I worry that working here will be a stifling experience.

The granite-like stone flooring has an artsy, mildly cracked appearance of being millennia-old—in a retro kind of way. The building’s front facade is mostly dark brown wood, much like the inside rafters, which are decorated with fake hanging vines and flowers. Past the
counter where orders are processed is a small office; this wifi-offering restaurant appears to use multiple computers for its administrative operations.

Not to needlessly compare this restaurant with the one I was at last week, but the paintings here are similarly floral but grander, with frames that jut out a few inches into the real world. Various corners of the place are embellished with sculptures, koi ponds, trickling water, and plastic potted plants. Much of the interior has the feeling of an old Chinese house, with porch-like fixtures rimming some of the ceiling’s edges. The window shades are a lavender color, and the overhead lights are half-lantern and half-IKEA.

Here, the staff are uniformed based on their jurisdiction, and I learn some of these distinctions as time passes. For example, hostesses (who greet customers at the door but can also double as regular fuwuyuan) are dressed in magenta full-body dresses with a slit up to the thigh, whereas fuwuyuan are in deeper purple short-dresses with a purple pocketed-apron, and finally, supervisors and male wait staff (which are a minority) are dressed in white.

After some time I am given a cup of water, a more formal welcome, and then a form to fill out. It’s all in Chinese so I struggle through its odd requests, which includes a line for “hobbies,” as well a section for detailed information on my family. My Chinese illiteracy is revealed when my best attempt results in a messy, half-filled-out fusion of two languages and two or three handwritings (thanks to the waitresses who, gigglingly, help me out, reminding me how I’m just a lost little kid who can’t read or write when he’s in China). After relinquishing a copy of my passport (which made me nervous), the just-arrived Manager Dao informs me that if they really hire me, they’ll have to fill out a lot of complicated paperwork and reports.

–Ah, so that means you probably don’t need to officially list me, then,” I say.

–Well, it means that we can’t officially list you,” he says, and then gives me some special instructions: if a government inspector comes and checks our State IDs, I am to say that I’m just there to hang out and that I’m not getting paid.

Breakfast involves a surprisingly full-featured meal of rice paired with two dishes, one of which actually contains meat. Then, I am swept off to the front welcome area of the restaurant, where I learn that every day at 10:50am and 4:50pm the managers hold “meetings” for all of the
non-kitchen staff. We line up in height order (—Usually I stand on the end, but you're taller than me,—" exclaims the somewhat tall girl on my right) and in two rows, facing the four white-shirt supervisors and the two managers. I find myself introduced to the group, along with another new guy, who has been nicknamed —L'il' Chubby.—1

Meetings have an odd sort of military flair. One of the supervisors kicks things off by bowing stiffly and saying, —How is everyone,—” to which everyone replies in cadence, —Good, very good, extremely good.—” This is followed by a quick roll call (—Weien Wang?— —Here.—”), followed by an update on how we should take care of our jurisdictions for the day, what dishes are not currently available, and also which ones we should recommend to customers on a given day (perhaps, I consider, because we are overstocked on that item). The managers then step forward to share any additional information (or, as I’ll later find, to chew us all out), and after that, Manager Dao calls me up to teach an English lesson. Apparently, this is something that he has been doing with them for a while, but part of my being hired was that I would help with this program.

Today, one of the fuwuyuan gets called forward to read a list of terms and nouns in English, which she does bashfully now that I’m here (—But… you're a professional,—” she protests, looking at me), and then it’s my turn to read the list for everyone, pointing to the words as they come across: crab, shrimp, spare rib, pork, chop, beef, coca cola, apple vinegar, peach juice, shark’s fin. They repeat the words mechanically, with some kind of a unified Chinese accent. I recall that words like —vinegar—” are extra difficult because there’s no —vuh—” sound in Chinese.

And then, with another warm welcome to the new guys, and a reminder that questions about English should be directed to Weien, the busy part of the workday begins. I get —assigned”— to supervisor Chang Meikang (or —Shifu,—” which in this context means —master—”), who is in charge of showing me the ropes. Because I’m tall and the job involves standing on chairs, my first job is to help clean out the bug-zapping lanterns.

I am congratulated on being congming —clever”— when I’m the only one who can figure out how to open up the bug lantern for cleaning, but when Chang Meikang starts going

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1 —Chubby—” happens to be a term of endearment in China, and so even the management of the restaurant calls him this.
through how the tables are numbered for each of the three floors, I don’t feel *congming* at all. In fact, work here is starting to feel potentially quite stressful, from all the rules that they have listed. For example, there are fairly intense penalties for sending a dish to the wrong table (you pay for it), as well as small penalties for breaking plates (between 30 cents and a few dollars, depending on the size of the plate), which makes carrying a tray full of stacked plates, cups, and bowls a truly nerve-wracking experience. That said, today, my job seems really relaxed. In fact, I get the feeling that the restaurant is overstaffed, which may just be because lunch isn’t as busy.

They say that my circumstance is *poli*, an exception, and it’s true on multiple accounts. I work a static schedule from 9:30am to 5pm, am off on weekends, won’t be involved much with customers, and I teach English.

After asking a couple people what they did before coming to this restaurant, and finding that they simply worked at other restaurants, I’m beginning to wonder if Tan is a bit of an exception, himself, with his decision to change to working a fruit stand. On the other hand, Wang from the Real Estate office told me that he’s moved up from once doing waiter-work. Would it be helpful to look at people with desk jobs and find out how many of them once held positions in foodservice?

At around 2pm, when most of the girls get off work, Chang Meikang and one of the waitresses take me out to go buy my uniform, which requires black pants and black shoes, neither of which I have with me, since I came to China planning to be a dishwasher. We go past the megamall Solana and into a small, rough-looking subdivision, where I am led to a sort of all-purpose marketplace area. The second floor of this complex contains textiles and clothing, with everything from shirts to bedsheets to shoes.

I can’t help but feel excited to go on an “excursion” with my coworkers, so soon after starting out here, given that at the other restaurant I never went anywhere with anyone. When the girls go out, they change into street clothes, and the transformation is startling. At 2pm, even the most calm, serious, and mature-looking of our white-bloused supervisors morphs into a girl with a bubbly shirt, frilly skirt, lace sneakers, and colorful socks, and at 2pm, the phone and the instant messenger and the mp3s come out and the person who was instructing you how to
communicate with customers now manifests herself as, well, a kid, probably in her early twenties but also possibly a teenager.

I end up getting work pants and some unattractive black cloth shoes for a total of 40RMB (about six dollars); despite Chang Meikang warning me that we’ll really have to bargain, she didn’t seem to push the storekeeper much at all. Both the pants and shoes are the largest possible length/size.

On our way back to the restaurant, I am invited to visit their dorm, which is located on the sixteenth floor of a crusty green building, and sleeps sixteen girls, who share a single bathroom. It turns out that the ‘dorm’ is really just an apartment, where each of the three small connected rooms have been crammed full of bunkbeds. One of the rooms is so cramped that I can barely squeeze in through the metal bedframes to get in. There, one girl is taking an afternoon nap, while the others are relaxing, talking a little, and playing with their phones. One girl offers me a lightly sweetened waffle-like biscuit, and then goes back to her magazine.

The walls are plastered with celebrity posters. Shoes are stuffed in odd places, and, sitting down, I find that the beds are quite hard. They’re almost not mattresses so much as straw pads, with sad, ineffectual bedsheets stretched over them. A table in the middle of the room (which effectively renders the rest of the open space… not open) is piled with random knickknacks, .10 RMB pieces, and the odd beauty product.

After being informed by Chang Meikang not to tell anyone that I’d visited the girl’s dorm (which is against the rules and would result in the girls being penalized), I head back, not wanting the managers to wonder why I’ve been out so long. I get back around 3:15pm, only to find that there isn’t much work to do from 2-5pm, unless for some reason more than just a few customers show up during that time.

I spend a little time talking to Manager Dao, who tells me that he loves to learn, which is why he pushes his staff to learn English. At the end of the day, I consider how, compared to the other one, this restaurant seems to have a lot more laughter, friendliness, and, well, sisterhood, but there are also more rules and consequences, as well as twice-daily meetings. All told, this is a pretty decent tradeoff.
Profile: Chang Meikang

Cheeky Chang Meikang seems really well-liked by the other girls; she is the "fun supervisor." Her hair is cropped in a bob with a couple longer side bangs near the front, and is tinted slightly brown. The features on her round face alternate between gleeful and dramatically fierce. When I talk to her more about my research with them, she suggests that I study the people who are living and working in smaller cities, who are even more different from me.

→You should get to know Chinese people who are actually poor," she says. →We're pretty similar, you and I, right? I mean, other than the language part." Well, maybe she is right. I ask her why she came to Beijing, and she cites that she has relatives here.

→Duh," she says, throwing a hand in the air. →Why else would you go to a random city? If I got off a train in Shanghai, I wouldn't know north, south, east, or west! You have to know people in a strange place." I also asked how she managed to get a job here as a supervisor.

→applied for it," she says. She has had experience at two other restaurants, and she's been here a total of 3 months, and considers that she might try working in retail next.

→Why retail?" I say. →Is it better?"

→Well, for sure it'll be better than this."

→But if it's for sure better, why aren't we all flocking to retail?"

→It's a personal preference thing," she says. She also tells me that she doesn't have to send money back home, that her parents don't need it. Also, when she goes home, even though her parents live on a farm, she doesn't have to help, and is allowed to rest while on breaks. By this point, I start to feel bad for probing.

As a supervisor, Chang Meikang can be a real character. She likes to bark commands at people, mocking fury when they move slowly from one station to another. Oddly enough, she
doesn't seem to care at all what Manager Gan thinks, will laugh during serious parts of meetings, and call him Crazy, literally to his back as he walks by. She’ll even shout across the restaurant, despite there being customers present.

“I’m here to play,” she says, and adds that money isn’t a big deal to her. I ask if she has any dreams for the future.

“Nah,” she says. “I’ll be a boss.”

“What kind of boss?” I ask.

“I’m not sure right now.” She reminds me a lot of a college freshman. I ask her what she liked studying the most, back when she was still in school.

“Electricity.”

“That’s good.”

“Good?” she laughs.

August 11, 2010, Wednesday (Day 2)

Being at this restaurant is a reminder of why I initially opted for the bland repetition of dishwashing. Watching my coworkers bustle around and take care of any number of unnamed tasks seemingly at random makes me feel both urgent and useless, so I end up simply following people around trying to find something to do. After breakfast (which includes a kind of watered-down egg drop soup with spinach), we have a bit of downtime, where I witness some of the waitresses playfully (I hope) putting each other down and in the process learn two handy new colloquialisms: ruozhi (“retard”) and baichi (“idiot”).

Speaking of which, yesterday, Chang Meikang had told me that the younger Manager, who goes by Gan,” has naozibing, which suggests that he is insane. I don’t know what she is talking about until today, during the end of the meeting, when he steps in and begins to lecture us
in a very stern, sometimes raised voice. We find ourselves collectively reprimanded for the following misdemeanors:

1) Pen usage. Manager Gan had been displeased to find that people had signed the time in/out form with multiple colors of pen (i.e. blue, black, and even red) as well as pencil.

- Pencil? Didn’t your teachers tell you – what are pencils for? What if you use pencil, then I erase it, and suddenly you weren’t at work? And what is red ink for? Is it so hard to find the right color pen, or do you have to grab whatever writing utensil is closest to you?” Until now, I hadn’t even known that a time in/out form existed.

2) The basement. No one who doesn’t work at our restaurant is allowed into the basement areas, which includes our breakroom-changing room-worker dining room on –1. The actual kitchen is located on –2.”

- You must watch the stairway, and if someone starts going down, you have to move quickly and tell them, “Sorry, but the kitchen is off-limits, thank you for your cooperation.” Manager Gan’s tone softens a little. – What if they go down, and then see something that causes me trouble? My trouble is your trouble; we have to work together.”

At this point, Manager Dao steps in, saying, “What he’s talking about, more than anyone causing ‘trouble,’ is a safety issue. What if someone goes down and, say, does something to the food, and then a customer gets sick?”

3) Politeness. According to Manager Gan, we need to boost our hospitality, be more polite, and welcome people more warmly. – Even our dishwashers ought to say “Nihao” and smile when someone passes. If someone sees that even our dishwashers are so polite and welcoming, then they’ll think, “Ah, this is truly a restaurant with good service.” Furthermore, we should smile and greet each other, too. A “Good morning, Manager Gan, how are you,” can go a long way.”

Part of his qualm is professionalism, as well; apparently some of the waitresses had been singing, dancing, and humming while they ran tables, which he finds most irregular.
During this intense session, most of the staff seems pretty silent, but occasionally, I catch people glancing at each other. Chang Meikang all but openly laughs during the process, smiling at me knowingly, with eyes that say, “See? He’s crazy.” On the other end of the spectrum, one of the other supervisors visibly clenches his jaws together each time the Manager’s voice reaches a peak.

When I talk to Manager Dao later, he tries to explain these outbursts, and introduces his desire to motivate and improve his staff. It strikes me as a little weird that he talks to me as some sort of other, a person who is also on the outside of the big picture, which he paints with emotion. This odd “privilege” is awkward, but I assume it has partly to do with his passion for the issue, and partly because he wants to share his knowledge, as far as it relates to my research, which he surprisingly seems to support.

Manager Dao tells me about the “yueguang group,” which describes the spending habits of China’s new generation of young people. Yueguang means “moonlight,” but it is also a homophone for “month-gone,” suggesting a group for which “last month’s wages is already gone.” He has two similar terms for me: one is luohun, which describes a generation of kids who are getting married without having any assets. The other is the idea of kenlao—“gnawing old bones,” which is a metaphor for those living off of their parents. Dao says that he just wants these kids to dream, to set goals, and think about where they really want to be in the future.

We chat about development in China, in lesser-known southern provinces like Shenzhen, where he believes that things are developing faster than and starting to surpass even the financial success of Hong Kong.

“However, there are still a lot of places in China that are truly very destitute,” he says, using the word pingqiong to connote the condition of dire need. Medium-built Manager Dao’s receding hairline reveals a roundish head, which in turn is speckled by crooked, browning teeth and a prominent mole, but his pleasantness and sense of humor makes overshadows these signs of age. He also possesses surprisingly good English, recalling all sorts of random restaurant-related terminology. Later, I’ll witness him successfully take the order of a German customer and her children.
―Three, right? They wanted three waters?” he says to me, beaming as he walks over. I nod, am impressed, and say so. No wonder he expects a lot out of his staff, which in his opinion, and with their young minds, should be positively overflowing with learning potential, right?

Much of today involves learning more job-oriented details, including how to hold a tray (fingers-and-palm forming a supporting cup, elbow near a 90-degree angle, arm close to but not touching the side of your body, left hand taking most of the weight, right hand helping only if necessary), how to dry dishes (using both hands to wipe both surfaces of a plate simultaneously), and refreshing my memory on the table numbers, which still confuse me. One of the fuwuyuan, Ingrid, is my main tutor today, teaching me how to take care of tasks within the little beicanjian¹ room. Watching her and others bustle about, I soon realize not only how to put chopsticks into sleeves, but that everyone seems to have their own way of doing it, which applies to almost every task in the restaurant.

The beicanjian room, located in the back wall of the first floor dining area, has tile walls, an open window to the restaurant, and is entered through a very light, swinging door. Rather than actually waiting tables, most of my work involves tasks like loading trays, filling bowls of rice or green pea sugar soup, drying dishes, and emptying dirty dishes and the slops that come with them into the bins on the floor. The table houses extra bins, tablecloths, and napkins beneath it, and by its side rests a cardboard box where recyclables go. Opposite the table are the two dumbwaiters, one of which is broken.

My coworkers and I leave cups and random items (like my water bottle) on a ledge in this small hallway of a room. Sometimes, one of the restaurant walkie-talkies is stored there, as well—the kitchens, cashier, and three main floors are connected by a radio system. Connected to the room where I work is another very small room (imagine a glorified closet) dominated by a medium-sized metal sink. This is where —Dajie” (meaning —big sister”) works.

Dajie (nicknamed such simply because she’s considerably older than the wait staff) has an interestingly in-between position in the restaurant; unlike most of the dishwashers, she doesn’t work in the kitchen, where large, powerful faucets can be found. Instead, she works almost

¹ This room has a sign that gives it the English label: —Operating Room.” However, beicanjian translates more accurately to —meal preparation room.” Strangely enough, however, extremely little meal preparation actually occurs in this room.
entirely inside the beicanjian with her wobbly metal sink, specifically washing chopsticks, cups, small plates, bowls, and other silverware.

I assume that this is considered to be more efficient, since those items are all stored on the ground floor anyway, and it wouldn’t make sense to send them up and down the dumbwaiter all the time. The shelves near Dajie‘s sink contain water boilers, random containers, little dishrags, a collection of sauces that customers might want, and also an assortment of my coworkers‘ belongings.

Manager Dao says that the folks who come here to work usually haven‘t gone to college, though I later meet a girl who, like Mao from the other restaurant, has completed three years of undergraduate studies.

―College graduates wouldn‘t be working here,‖ he says.

―But this does seem like a pretty good restaurant?‖ I say, tilting my head a little.

―It’s a better one,‖ he says, quietly, ―But it’s also harder to work here than at smaller places, and it gets fairly tough on them.‖ I wonder if the other employees at Nanguo regularly see this side of the older Manager, but I do see his point. Even little things about working here can be terrifying; in my years of going to college, few experiences match the stress involved with bringing a customer a wobbling carafe of hot juice (it’s a Chinese thing) on a tray that is also counterbalancing a couple other dishes.

Other than my conversations with Manager Dao, I get the feeling that I’m more invisible here than at the other restaurant, and it’s mostly thanks to my uniform: black slacks, black cloth shoes (like those kungfu-ish ones) with white socks (it doesn't look as bad as it sounds, but almost), and a tucked-in, buttoned-up white shirt with a little tag that says, 服务员: 王维恩 (fuwuyuan: Wang Weien).

Every day, I change from street clothes to this uniform in a dark, tiny closet in the —1” basement level. The closet is littered with random shoes and articles of clothing, and the only thing that you can sit on is an odd half-chair where the arms and back have been smashed off. To my chagrin, I notice that the girls seem to change clothing really quickly (i.e. faster than me),
especially when they’re changing out of their uniforms. I think part of this has to do with the obsession many here have with getting off work (xiaban) and getting breaks or days off (generally known as xiuxi).

“When do you get off work?” and “Which days do you get to xiuxi [from work]?” are everyday questions, and my coworkers marvel both (with sympathy) that I work during the 2-5pm zhiban (“straight through”) shift every day, and (with envy) that I only work five days a week. Because I leave work at 5pm, the last thing I do every day is go to the afternoon meeting. Today, Manager Gan reprimands us again (twice in two days; I wonder how often my coworkers have heard these lectures) for having poor manners and for not caring enough.

“I’ve told you before,” he says, which is true, “You need to work as if you were the owner of this restaurant. If you want to advance in your work, imagine how you would work if you were the manager.” He also berated the group for someone’s failure to know how much salt to put in a saucer when a customer asks for it (salt isn’t as popular of a condiment as it is in the U.S.).

“Filling it all the way is too much, and wasteful. But you don’t want to put in only a little bit, and make us seem stingy. Therefore, the key is to use your brain and add just enough so they that receive not too little, and not too much. Think about it.”

Sometimes I wonder just how significant it is that Americans put so much stress on thinking for themselves when they approach problem solving, instead of just plowing through obstacles in a systematic fury. Does there really exist a tangible differential of creativity, by which Americans manage to produce more ingenuity per capita than populations like the Chinese?

Profile: Shanon

Shanon, a somewhat older married member of the staff, is in charge of serving tea to customers, and holds that she is satisfied with her English vocabulary being limited to “Would you like some tea?” “One cup,” and “One pot.” Apparently, her husband is also in the business of serving tea, only at another establishment. Her 6 year-old son is currently in Beijing, but he’ll be
coming her for first grade in a couple of years. She tells me that she lives pretty far away, and has to ride the bus to get here and back home to her husband.

Then one day, Shanon walks over to me and quietly says that she got divorced a year ago, which is a pretty surprising clarification on her relationship status.

“Then again,” she says, without waiting for my reaction, “Maybe it was my fault.” A lot had happened; her brother passed away, and then there was a lot of disagreement as to whether she should go home to see her mother.

And suddenly she was crying. I wasn't sure what to make of my silent role in the conversation—did I just happen to be the nearest person standing around at that moment, or was it because I was a foreigner, which maybe made it easy for her to toss me some personal information?

Two days later, I overheard Shanon telling one of her other coworkers that all is well at home, and that her “husband is back.” I think she saw me there, and we possibly traded a look of some kind. It's hard to tell, because of how Chinese facial expressions are subtle to the point of nonexistence. American eyebrows exhibit a huge range of motion compared to the forte- and piano-only smiles and frowns of the Chinese.

August 12, 2010, Thursday (Day 3)

I actually feel busy today, which leads me to happily believe that I‘m finally getting a hang of what needs to be done around here. After the ten-minute bike ride to work, I go downstairs to the closet to change out of my shorts and t-shirt, and then I get right into cleaning up after last night’s carnage, which this time includes a few packs’ worth of cigarette ash on the floor. After sweeping, dusting, and some table setting, I am instructed to go down to the kitchen (—2”) to pick up breakfast.

This kitchen makes the one I got used to at the other restaurant look like the inside of a witch doctor’s laboratory. The Nanguo kitchen is impressively large, spacious, and all-around
reminiscent of what you see on TV shows about cooking competitions. Moving about the network of shiny metallic cooking surfaces are over a dozen white-clad cooks, preparers, and supervisors, and in the far corner a room for cleaning fish and washing vegetables contains a few more staff and several large aquariums. When I look their way, a smiling woman with a large bunch of celery in her fist points at me casually, and seems to say something to her coworkers, who murmur in response.

I find later that those in that group are combination dishwashers and fish/vegetable cleaners, and most of them are older folks. When we get acquainted, they are surprised to find that I can speak Chinese.

—Say Tiananmen,” asks the older woman who had been holding the celery. My brow furrows, and I hesitate. Is this some kind of Shibboleth that I don’t know about?

—Um, Tiananmen,” I say, and they seem disappointed that the famous monument in Beijing doesn’t sound any different when I say its name.

—What is it in English?”

—There’s no English name,” I say. —It’s just… Tiananmen. I guess you could call it heaven-peace-door, if you’re just translating the words in the name.” Luckily, she finds these words sufficiently amusing.

Today I also get to know supervisors Lydia and Wolf Lang a little better. The former is a tall, very slender girl with more conventionally attractive, but unobtrusive features. Her wispy, veil-like haircut adds to the wind-blown and aloof aura that she assumes during work hours, though on one or two occasions I have witnessed her begrudgingly emit a girlish giggle. The silk supervisor uniform she wears has the look of a traditional Chinese half-gown, but with a black skirt worn underneath it.

And by —getting to know them,” I mean that I witness the two supervisors have an intense dispute about something. On the receiving end of Lydia’s fierce, bugged-out eyes is Wolf Lang, a somewhat-short man with small, soft eyes, a sharp nose, slightly curled hair, and a narrow face. Like me, he wears a white-and-black shirt-and-slacks ensemble, but with cooler shoes. The two
are so incensed in what can only be a lovers’ quarrel that they don’t even turn to look at me when I walk in on them as they argue in the beicanjian, from which short outbursts and low, exasperated chatter can be heard. Later on, I ask Lydia if things are okay.

—Butai xing,” she says, smiling just a little. Not great.

—Do you guys have a tebie guanxi?” I say. For some reason, when I speak in Chinese, I lose most of my sense of delicacy. After she doesn’t reply, I continue, —Alright, let secrets be secrets.”

—What secret?” she says, with a huff. —Everyone knows.”

—Well,” I say, wondering just how much delicacy I have lost by this point, —I don’t like to guess.” Her facial collagen seems to stiffen even further for just a moment, and we return to our work.

Later, when Wolf Lang shows up, he drops a couple packets of milk (China sells milk in single-serving bags) in front of her, and as he walks away, I can see a grin in her glare.

—Even without you saying anything,” I say, —I can tell that you do like him a lot.”

—Me?” she says, with mock offense.

—Well, I can tell that he likes you, too. It’s just not as easy to see, because men have to banku.” To banku means to —play it cool.”

After breakfast (peppers with potatoes, eggs with spinach, and rice), we file up for the morning meeting, where the first managerial reproof of the day (this time from Manager Dao) addresses how we need to —have more sense,” and also how best to help people order fish, as in how many servings are in each type of fish, and how to recommend and sell more of them. For example, if a kind of fish feeds two, and there are seven customers, you should suggest not three, but four fish. In typical Manager Dao fashion, his clear goal of maximizing profit is thinly veiled by an odd, broad sort of non-logic. For example:
You want them to have more rather than less. What if an eighth joins them? Then what? Then things can get complicated for the party, and in the end no one has had enough. Either you recommend four fish or seven, but not three. That way, not only do we sell more, but the guests are happy, and all is well. After all, those who come here, they do have money.”

At this point, Manager Dao starts telling us that we need to work harder, be more serious, and be more earnest in our work. Then he says something surprising.

“Look at Wang Weien—he only just started, and already he is that diligent!” This is fairly uncomfortable, and I try to avoid eye contact with anyone (though I do notice a couple glances from my coworkers, some of whom are smiling). On a variety of levels, this is food for thought. Am I somehow imposing my American-Chinese workaholism on this workplace? Are my coworkers reflecting a truer China, one where the majority of folks are actually not that obsessed with hard work? Does the country simply try to praise and pedestalize the successes of the minority who are? Or are my coworkers simply exemplifying the theory of rational economic action, in that they see no sense in working any harder than necessary?

Despite getting more comfortable with my work (which involves knowing what to do when the slops bins fill up, or if there are dishes lying over there, or if there are chopsticks in a pile over here, or how to fill bowls of rice quickly and attractively—with practice), I still get reprimanded for stumbling as far as table numbering. Sometimes while we work, my coworkers ask me random English-related questions, like how to say “beautiful” or “friend” or “let’s be friends” or “one cup of tea.”

Finally, a common element of conversation continues to be expressing how badly one wants to get off work. Sometimes, despite it being only half past noon, I’ll catch one of the fuwuyuan looking longingly at the clock and gasping, “Xiaban!” (Work’s end!)

Question of the day: if these folks are the yueguang group and are spending all their money from one month to another, then what are they spending it on?

August 13, 2010, Friday (Day 4)
Cleaning the floor at Old Jade is an oddly tedious job, especially because chairs around
the round table are placed such that there is literally no efficient way to clean under it. Also, the
floor is frustratingly rough, almost designed to trap crumbs and debris in the deeply textured
surface, so sweeping is annoyingly ineffectual. Right when I’m about to mutter an expletive,
Chang Meikang walks by and compliments me on my work.

“My disciple mops so well,” she says, proclaiming the statement. Ever since being
assigned” to her for training, she happily established a Shifu/Tudi (Master/Disciple) relationship
between us. I later find that I am actually not Master Chang’s first assignment, which makes me
Er Tudi, or Disciple No. 2.

When I finish sweeping, Chang Meikang sends me up to the third floor to see if it’s clean.
After having a look around, I find to my horror that I have left a dark footprint on a wet tile.
Alarmed by this blemish, I kneel down and try to hastily mop at it with my right knee, only to
hear a pop-rip sound. Feeling awkwardly around my crotch, I discover a large tear which I
eventually discern is mostly invisible as long as I’m standing up straight; if I sit down carelessly
and someone looks at the right (or, well, wrong) angle, they will catch a flash of gray
undergarment.

Later, one of the tea girls asks me to bring the 5-gallon jug of water upstairs from the
kitchen, but when I try to put it down without bending over, my squatting motion causes the hole
to increase in size, to the point where it’s no longer discreet, even while I’m standing. One last
rip occurs while I try to place a dirty dish into the appropriate dirty-dish bin, and thus the gaping
hole from just below the zipper up to my butt is complete.

By this point it’s bad enough that Manager Dao can see it, and he has someone fetch me
an extra pair of pants from the store room in the -2 basement. To my surprise, these new pants
are actually long enough, but they feel a bit tight. Later, I discover that they’re particularly tight
around the buttocks area and made of a stretchy material, so much so that I can visibly flex my
gluteal muscles. “Weien’s tight pants” thereby and unfortunately becomes a topic of
conversation on two or three occasions in the future. (These new pants last me the rest of the
duration of my tenure at Nanguo. And thus concludes the tale of my ripped pants).
Just before breakfast, Manager Dao calls me over to Table 109, the round table, where he begins to sigh about “these kids” who aren’t taking control of their lives, these kids who need to learn how to set goals. I respond by telling him encouragingly about how Ingrid wants to buy a car.

“Wanting a car is good,” he says, unmoved, “But they don’t know how they’re going to get there. How much will she need to save? How long will that take?”

After breakfast (which is to the delight of many, noodles in tomato-with-egg soup), Manager Gan gives Dao a toothpick, which prompts the latter to call out the two male supervisors sitting with them about how despite being there for so long, they still haven’t learned basic manners.

All of this seems to build up to the meeting, where Manager Dao declares to the staff, “I spend more time with you than with my own children, and you spend more time with me than with your parents.” This is why, he says, he wants to “raise them up” and instill good qualities in them. I wonder to myself how much of these lectures really get through to them, in the end.

A half-British, half-Hongkongese friend of mine says that Chinese people are pretty much used to getting yelled at once in a while, so they just kind of bear it and forget it. This reminds me of the time when Manager Gan yelled at us to increase our quality of service by doing things like helping our customers apportion (“fen”) soup when we bring it to them, but then, just hours later, I watched Supervisor Lydia simply drop off a pot of soup.

“We’re not gonna fen that?” I asked, biting my lip meekly.

“Eh… don’t want to,” she said, and that was that.

Sometimes I think it’s a pity that some of the lectures aren’t really internalized. I can tell that Manager Dao really tries to get them interested in things like learning English, which really would help their future careers. On the other hand, Manager Gan’s verbal thrashings for, say, not memorizing the drink list, or for not knowing the order in which drinks should be offered, tend to err on the side of tyrannical. Today, he announces that everyone needs to do a
better job of learning the names of the dishes that we offer, as well as how they should look once prepared so that we can catch any mistakes before they get from the kitchen to the customer.

Still ever the mediator, Manager Dao then steps forward and says that Manager Gan has a really tough job, since he has to manage both us and the restaurant itself.

―The two most difficult things in the world," says Dao, ―Are getting the contents of your mind into someone else's mind, and getting the contents of someone else's pocket into your own." It isn't the most elegant proverb I’ve ever heard, but we understand what he’s getting at: those are the two things that Manager Gan tries to do on a daily basis. Later, when I’m filling rice bowls, Manager Dao gives me a piece of his own mind.

―Two of those could fill three bowls. Don't make the bowl so full and you won't have to squash it down like that." I feel scolded, despite the fact that just a few minutes earlier I had filled a bowl of rice that he had remarked was ―pretty." Serving rice at Nanguo isn't just a matter of getting rice in a bowl. You have to get just the right amount in, and then slide the metal rice paddle around the edge of the bowl in order to make it look like a perfect dome. This is something I practice as I work mostly on my own in the back room; for the first time, I feel really busy, emptying the dumbwaiter and portioning out rice and rushing it out to the customers, to whom I chant the obligatory, ―Sir, hello, sorry to bother you all for a moment, here's your [formal →you"] rice, please enjoy."

By 3:30pm I realize that I've been on my feet for almost six straight hours. I put down a mop and notice that my shirt has gone translucent from sweat. Between 2-5pm, when customer flow tends to be minimal, our restaurant turns off the air conditioning.

As the resident English-speaker, I'm given one other assignment besides teaching English, and it involves looking through the menus for mistakes, only to find that the professionally-bound and well-designed hardcover menus are riddled with errors. For example, sometimes two dishes are randomly listed with have the same English name, which can be very confusing—like with the shrimp dish (clearly shrimp from the Chinese name and the picture) which is labeled —Jellyfish.”
No wonder we don’t sell many of those,” says Manager Dao, when I point out that one of his fish dishes has been translated into what looks like garbled Latin.

Later, when we’re about to line up for the afternoon meeting, I ask someone why there seem to be fewer workers today than when I first started.

“Tamen bu ganle,” she says. “They’ve moved on,” and the implicit expansion of this statement is that “payday came, and then they went.” It’s an unnerving reminder of how transient work is for these folks; sometimes the only way to keep someone around for an entire month is to wait that long to pay them.

At the meeting, we were instructed not to abuse the dumbwaiter. Our restaurant has two of them, but one is broken and the other runs slowly. As such, Manager Gan explained that if someone on the second floor orders beer (which is kept on the first floor), someone should just run it up by hand. The meeting got more interesting when he started talking about government inspectors, and that if one ever came by, someone was to drop everything, run downstairs to the kitchen, and have our kitchen staff hide the hetun (which are apparently a kind of toxic pufferfish).

“I don’t care who it is, if any of you notice an inspector talking to one of us, you must immediately go downstairs and ‘tidy up,’ particularly the hetun.”

Apparently it’s illegal to serve hetun in our district.

Profile: Ingrid

Ingrid is one of the first fuwuyuan who I get to know, since we both end up working together a lot in the beicanjian back room. In a sense, the blonded, shrill-voiced girl becomes my tutor, even though Chang Meikang and others warn me not to follow her every (sometimes erroneous) move.

She seems unafraid to tell me that her goal is to someday buy a car, which she can get back home for the equivalent of about $7,000. She claims that it will probably take her three years to accomplish this goal, which seems somewhat optimistic. Apart from the car idea, she
doesn’t tell me about any other dreams that she has. In school, she liked singing and drama, but she adamantly declares that she isn’t going back to school.

As we dry chopsticks and slip them into their sleeves, she tells me about her boyfriend from Henan, who works with an insurance company here in Beijing. Her own work history is traced back to a small restaurant in Hebei province that only had special reservation-only rooms and therefore had only a few customers every month.

“I slept a lot,” she says, and it starts to make more sense, why kids her age would want to leave the countryside for places like Beijing. When I inquire further, she says that she told her parents that she wanted to leave home and chuquwan’r (which translates to “go out and play” but means, as you might imagine, something a little more significant). Because her parents didn’t agree, she left in secret, and only called her family once she arrived in Beijing. She’s only just arrived, but she plans to send half of her income home to her parents.

“I mostly want it sent home so that they can save it for me,” she says, “Since I don’t have a bank account here. Besides, my dad is old, and I don’t want them to have to work too hard. This way, they can buy some things that they like to eat.” She smiles a little at this thought before resuming her work.

From what I gather from Ingrid’s odd, run-on way of constant talking, her parents have a business or at least are trying to start one back home in Hebei, something along the lines of a clothing store franchise, either Beijing or Hebei or hopefully both. After a while, it gets hard to keep track of what Ingrid is trying to say, or even if she’s just muttering under breath.

She talks about how when she was young, she liked flowers, and so her parents planted a bunch of flowers in this one garden, and how sometimes they’d go out and eat in the yard.

“Youth was pretty fun,” she says, as if she is now an old woman. Later, the house was rebuilt, and the garden went with the old house. On the bright side, her family still grows a variety of produce that she misses eating: apples, corn, wheat, grapes, pears, apricots, and various other fruits and vegetables.
—It’s harvest time about now,” she says, her voice like a long mew, —But I shan’t have even a taste.”

**August 14-15, 2010, Saturday and Sunday**

Steven is a regal-looking manager of a franchise named Ten Fu’s that sells tea and tea-flavored snacks. He’s actually an American-born Taiwanese man, but he’s been in China long enough that his grasp of Mandarin and of the local culture is enviably polished. I’ve gotten to know him better in the last couple weeks through another friend, and when I tell him about my research over some weekend dinner, his responses come, unsurprisingly, from his experiences as a store manager. For example, he believes that the model where everyone in the restaurant washes their own bowl after a meal is not based on a principle of cleanliness or ownership (as we are often led to believe), but because it makes for easier managing: if everyone washes their own bowl, it’s not very efficient, but it eliminates the need to assign someone to wash their peers’ dishes, especially at night when folks want to go home.

That we wash our own bowls suggests to Steven that we are poorly managed. He also has interesting views on things like the playful, sometimes negative banter that circulates between employees (like calling each other *ruozhi* or *baichi*—”retard” and ”idiot”—terms I had recently picked up). What I assume is harmless fun strikes Steven as something that can rub his employees the wrong way. He also considers *faqian* (penalizing poor behavior by giving someone a pay cut) to be poor managing.

—It’s easy to *faqian*. It’s much more difficult—but better in the long run—to actually teach them.” Steven talks about how after the 80s and 90s, managers could no longer simply tell employees what to do.

—You sort of have to coddle them, and train them carefully,” he says, running a hand through his thick hair, —And you also have to tell them _why_, ‘or else they’ll think that they’re smarter than you.” It’s surreal to hear him talk like this, because when the late 80s rolled around, Steven was probably seven years old. Then again, he’s the one who is studying management, and doing it all in Chinese.
So far, and based on what I’m seeing, I’m somewhat inclined to agree with Steven on many counts. I’m reminded of how Lydia didn’t bother to apportion out soup the way that our managers had requested that very morning. Plus, she’s one of the supervisors...

Later the same weekend, I sidle up to a security officer standing outside a random mall and ask him what it’s like to do his job. He informs me that his job is 1) easy to obtain, 2) worth 1100RMB ($160) a month, and 3) requires him to stand at his post from noon to 4pm, and then from 7pm to 11pm after a break. Taking a day off costs him 40RMB ($5), which doesn’t seem to be too much of a penalty, and I note that his eight-hour workday is actually pretty decent compared to what my server workmates are required to put out. You also get an empowering uniform, a walkie-talkie, and the authority to tell people what to do. On the other hand, you’re standing in roughly the same place for eight hours, and you probably don’t get room and board provided for you.

**August 16, 2010, Monday (Day 5)**

Today is *Qixi* or 7/7 on the lunar calendar, which is Valentine’s Day (or ‘*Qingren Jie*”) in China.

“The point of today is not diligence at romance, or diligence at finding romance,” says Manager Gan at our morning meeting. “The point of today is diligence at doing your duty.” Something has certainly been lost in translation here, but the point is that Manager Gan made sure to deliver something witty and stern before letting us start our day. I start mine by picking up a couple new bits of northern Mandarin slang:

The first is “Ai sheishei gen wo mei bianr,” which seems to mean, “Love who you want, it doesn’t matter to me.” I also learn “Ni xiang zenme zhao?” which translates to a crude, “Whatdya want?” and therefore strikes me as much more useful than the first sentence, but your mileage may vary.

I learn these new sentences from Lana, who occasionally does uncomfortable things like staring at me clownishly for a protracted period of time.
-What are you looking at?” I say, the words shooting out in a rush.

-Looking at your handsome,” she says, her grin widening. I try to chalk her shamelessness to the fact that it’s Qixi. Unfortunately, not everyone gets friendlier on Chinese Valentine’s Day. The customers remain quick to complain, calling the servers over to report that —there’s a hair in my soup!” or —this rice is not very warm anymore!” or —what is this? How dare you call this dish shredded celery with white pork serenade when there aren’t any peppers in it?”

The frequency at which customers file these verbal complaints makes me believe that one or more of the following are true: a) customers complain a lot more in China, b) the kitchen at my restaurant is prone to making mistakes, c) I’ve never spent much time watching customers in restaurants either in China or elsewhere, or d) something else is happening that I don’t understand. I’m hoping that b) isn’t the main cause, because part of my job is to catch mistakes, like the odd hair or bit of cigarette ash that happens to be floating along in someone’s soup when I pull it out of the dumbwaiter. I’ll actually touch a bowl of rice to check its temperature, or spend ten seconds peering at someone’s stew for alien objects, and then triumphantly fish out a bit of string or lint.

At one point I walk into the back room, where Alicia, who speaks the best (well, second best) English in the restaurant is talking to a rather crestfallen-looking —Big Sister” Dajie, who washes dishes on our floor. The former tells the tale of folks in China who go to the coastal city of Fujian, get on a boat, and then steal over to the United States—surreptitiously.

—How do they get over?” says Dajie.

—With shetou,” says Alicia, nonchalantly, as if it were common knowledge. I only later learn that shetou (which is a homonym for —tongue”) here actually means —snake head,” and refers to the role of a paid person-smuggler, in this case taking a Chinese person to the U.S. without a visa. Alicia has a lot to say about the States, like how if she marries an American and then divorces him, he’ll have to pay her a big fine, or how the exchange rate is 8:1 (which has not been true for at least, as far as I understand it, several years to a decade).
Shortly after, I notice one of the servers, Shen Na, tearing up. At first I think that this is due to some kind of onion-related mishap, but then I notice one of her friends comforting her. The large, red eye circles are also kind of a giveaway.

—What happened?” I ask.

—The manager scolded her,” says Alicia. Manager Dao has been away, which means that we haven’t been doing English lessons.

—How many people live in your dorm?” I say, rather randomly. Maybe I think it will take her mind off of things.

—Sixteen,” says Shen Na, her voice like a rock.

—Are you okay?”

—I don’t want to work here anymore,” she says. Selfishly, one of my first thoughts is oh no, I’m about to lose one of the consultants who I’m getting to know. I try to block the thought out.

—I hope you’re not leaving before I do, in early September,” I say, with caring that is at least partially sincere.

—No, I’ll probably finish the month, and wait till pay day before I leave.”

* * *

As this was my first day of work of the week (after having Saturday and Sunday off), I am again alerted to my coworkers’ obsession with getting time off or days off from their enthusiasm in asking me, on several occasions, —Where’d you go on your weekend? What did you do?” Similarly, I’ve been asked variations on, —What do you do in the evenings,” or —Where are you going now?” since I leave work at 5pm every day.

—Wang Weien, we all missed you these two days,” says Dajie, in a jolly, lilting voice. I respond by telling her that our lives are miserable whenever she takes a day off. It’s kind of true—on those days, we have to do her share of dishes.
The rest of the day passes slowly, without too much customer volume. During an idle moment, I attempt to ask Chang Meikang a finance-related question.

→Do you guys have enough money to use?"

→That depends," she says, measuring out her words, →Depends on your spending habits." I note that Chang Meikang tends to reply on behalf of the demographic that she believes she represents, unless I specifically ask for her personal opinion.

→So in general, you all need to spend money on… clothes? Cellphone minutes?"

→Well, we’re girls," she says. →So we need…” A pause.

→Makeup?" I offer.

→Yeah, we have to wash our faces. Not like you boys," she says. →Girls also love junk food.” She says these two words in English, evidence that I’ve actually managed to teach her something other than American cusswords. I spend the rest of my afternoon chatting mildly or watching the others use QQ on their phones. This is the life of the zhiban 2-5pm workers.

August 17, 2010, Tuesday (Day 6)

Dajie once mentioned that she has never seen an American dollar, so I’ve brought one in to show her today. Maybe I’ll give it to her sometime as a keepsake. Chang Meikang thinks that American money looks like the →death money” that the Chinese traditionally burn at funerals.

At today’s meeting, Manager Gan jumps into his usual scolding session with passion.

→The restaurant is big, and the person is small. Therefore, your primary responsibility is the restaurant. Everyone who has a significant other wanted to take yesterday off and spend Qingren Jie with them. But that’s not going to work.” Apparently a number of people didn’t show up for their evening shift. Manager Gan was also unhappy with the bookkeeping done by JJ Ning, one of our supervisors.

→Didn’t I tell you? You need to work as if you owned this place,” said the Manager. Then, turning to the rest of us, he continued, →If you need to, you can take off work. I’m reasonable. If
you really have an issue, or are sick, I will let you. But I want you to ask yourself—do you really have to take off work? Is it a life or death issue? Even I can’t choose when I rest—I have to follow the schedule, too. It’s as if you all think, ‘oh, it’s because you’re a manager, and you earn more.’ Yes, that’s true. But I’m still a human; don’t you think I want more days off, too?’”

I wonder how much he makes.

I also ask Lana why she’s skipping our morning meal.

“I had McDonalds!” she whispers loudly in response, and looks very pleased. It turns out that for a certain sector of young people in China, eating out at McDonalds really is kind of a big deal. An actual value meal at McDonalds or KFC costs over 20RMB, or 1.5% of a waitress’ monthly income. Along the same vein, I’ve heard that taking a girl out to eat at McDonalds a pretty decent date night, at least for low-income youth.

As we get into our workday, I notice Dajie carry a broken cup from her sink and stick it in the garbage can, slipping it underneath some other rubbish. ‘Shhhh,” she says to me, and then smiles. And that’s that. I guess a lot more plates and cups go broken with impunity than our managers must realize. I also notice that I’ve implicitly been included into an ‘us versus them’ binary, where we the workers have to band together against the authorities.

At any rate, it’s a relief that I can be trusted and counted as one of the group. Today’s also the day that I find out that the others sort of vie for the job that I do, that is, working inside the ‘Operating Room.” I start to appreciate the blessing of being able to work inside a room free from the gaze of customers and, more importantly, the management. Here in the back room, I’m free to relax, to lean against the wall, sit in a squatting position, or massage my temples if I have a headache, all things that we aren’t free to do in the main dining area.1

Another thing you can’t do in front of customers is give out back massages to your coworkers, which is something I’ve taken to doing for some of the other waiters, usually those who mutter about working too hard. It’s a little weird, but it makes people happy, and I enjoy that.

1 In Chinese restaurants, servers don’t periodically walk by to ask how you’re finding everything. Instead, waitstaff are placed at key points around the room, where they can be flagged down with a hand or, much more popularly, by a hollered “Fuwuyuan!”
Profile: Dajie

As aforementioned, “Dajie” simply means “older sister,” and I never get to know her by any other name. A Henan native, she is impressed when I remark on hearing how Henan is famous for being home to Shaolin Temple and a special type of Chinese opera. She says that she likes Beijing, because it reminds her of the city that she came from. Her husband works as a mechanic in the city, and they live together not too far from the restaurant.

Dressed in the kitchen-worker’s drab uniform of blue-and-white with ornamented crocs on her feet, Dajie sometimes reminds me of a little ram, standing at 5’2”, with very dark, small, and round eyes. Her arms look really strong, seeming as thick around the forearm as mine are around the bicep (which isn’t saying much, but still). She often comments that America must be a wonderful place, and when we have some downtime in the back room, she asks me what it’s like to live there, how much things cost, or what it’s like to take off in a plane.

“It’s like riding a train,” I say, “Except the rattling suddenly stops, and then you look out the window, and everything gets very small.” She doesn’t believe that there is poverty in the United States, and finds it disturbing that the exchange rate is 6.8RMB to the dollar.

“The renmenbi is so worthless?” she says, letting out a full-body sigh. I ask her why she chose to come to Beijing.

“Well, it’s the capital, isn’t it?” she says. I wonder what her life really is like in this city. It sounds like she spends all of her breaks playing mahjong, but otherwise, she says that she gets home at 11pm, washes her clothes, and only gets to bed by around 1am. Her two children, ages 8 and 11, live with her grandparents during the school year.

“Do you miss your kids very much?” I ask.

“I miss them,” says Dajie, “But I can call them.” I guess it makes a difference when your children get to be a bit older. At one point, she hopes aloud that her kids will someday be “like you, Weien,” with the opportunity to go to college and do fun things. I’m surprised by the “fun
things” part, but I realize that that is an apt way to describe the state of having enough prosperity that you are free enough to just have fun. To mess around. Until then, she plans to quit her job here soon, and possibly go back to factory work, making cell phones. Apparently, the hours in factories are longer, but the pay is better.

August 18, 2010, Wednesday (Day 7)

Shortly after I arrive at work and finish changing into my uniform, an extremely burnt-out Lydia stumbles in, ignores my general inquiry about the quality of her well-being, and then passes out at one of the tables in the corner. I shrug aside my questions and sweep around her deeply breathing form.

The scold-and-reprimand portion of today’s morning meeting is headed up by the two male supervisors, who seem to be trying their best to emulate the example of Manager Gan. Wolf Lang informs us that if ever he can let us leave early, he will, but we have to trust him. JJ Ning speaks a little more poetically, but basically tells us that we need to do a better job putting out table settings.

―A good company is built from the little matters,” he says. “You can’t only dream of big matters. And little matters grow to be big ones, too.” I wonder if there’s a bit of a guanxi-type thing going on, here. That is, it seems like if you’re on good terms with the supervisors, you’ll be more able to get away with drinking sweet green pea soup in the beicanjian, or with some friendly banter.

At some points today it gets busy enough today that I actually have to raise my voice in order to be heard among the others who are also all calling for cleaning and rice and soup and to move things around via the dumbwaiters. Hearing my own shouting, increasingly Beijing-like voice amid the din makes me feel like I’m finally finding my footing in all of this.

1 Guanxi is, quite possibly, the Chinese term that anyone vaguely interested in international business should know. Broadly translated as “relationships,” the term has the connotation of “connections,” as in “the slightly underhanded connections through which I received a given social favor.” The difference between Chinese and American networking is that no one raises an eyebrow if you get a job or into a school in China using guanxi (e.g. because your uncle knows the HR manager here or because your dad helped out this college dean that one time). There are entire books on guanxi. Without it, you had better actually be qualified.
It also seems like my listening (read: eavesdropping) comprehension is improving a little bit. During the 2-5pm break, I try to get a handle for Xiaopang and Wolf Lang's animated conversation. At first I think it’s them bragging about the tech specs of their phones, but then I hear something along the lines of “buying all the wings” which doesn’t make sense. Eventually I sort out that they’re discussing a computer game that they’re really into and possibly even spending money to play. The conversations are confusing, because they involve a website called QQ Xuanwu, and some kind of clothes purchasing system, and about earning however many tens thousands of “G.”

It's striking how important and ubiquitous the internet is becoming for this generation of migrant workers, at least as a source of entertainment and possibly as a source of news. Their phones consume them whenever we have breaks, and if they can get away with it, during work hours, too (this is, I realize, comparable to their American cohort). Every day from 2-5pm, we sit in the dark at the corner table, use QQ instant messenger, fold napkins (we’re still technically on duty), listen to music (these days, a song called “Burning” by Maria Arredondo is a hit around these parts), and smoke.

Occasionally, the girls will go out and buy snacks for each other. It reminds me of watching my parents and their friends fight over the bill at restaurants, except on a smaller scale, and with less drama: the girls casually take turns treating the others to a half-dollar chaobing (a savory fried cake), and there’s no need to keep any records of it. That said, I’m actually more surprised that they’ll purchase outside food (that isn’t necessarily so different than what the restaurant provides to us) only an hour before we are served dinner.

During the break, Chang Meikang teaches me how to write a variety of Chinese insults, including gun (F--- off”) and wakao (W---) and wasai (“Whoa”—not really a cuss) and maitai (filthy,” but more offensive) and shuotou wugui (“head-retracting turtle,” which is pretty insulting way to say - coward”). I also learn that Zhua zi nei!” means, “What are you doing!?“Chang Meikang is literate, in more ways than one.

August 19, 2010, Thursday (Day 8)
At the morning meeting, we are principally exhorted to be more pragmatic with how we distribute ourselves between customers. This is good advice, except it’s probably the fifth time I’ve heard it since coming to Nanguo. —Three of you shouldn’t be fussing over one table while three other tables are calling out, „Fuwuyuan!“

As I mop earlier that morning, I notice Lana and Shen Na talking quietly to each other, with glances in my direction. It’s a little while before Lana actually comes over and says that I’m mopping incorrectly. I know I mop a little strangely—drawing horizontal, sweeping strokes across the floor—but I feel that her rebuke is uncalled for.

—That’s not how Chinese people mop,“ she says shrilly, perhaps sensing my rebellion.

—Then what people am I?” I say, and stick out my chin a little.

—Anyway, it’s like this,” she says, and demonstrates a more vertical sweep. I consider it to be questionably more thorough, and comment incomprehensibly that Supervisor Lydia mops the way that I do. These moments of incomprehensibility are not uncommon, and usually when I have trouble understanding or being understood by a coworker, I conclude that I’m bad at speaking the language. On the other hand, I often catch my coworkers not understanding each other, either. Is this a symptom of the migration phenomenon, akin to what would happen if a kid from Chicago’s south side, a So-Cal pre-teen, and a Nashville country boy hung out with a couple of small-town New Englanders? Nominally, they’re speaking the same language, but the slang doesn’t make it.

Xing Xing, who is from Henan province, tells me that their days off are chosen and set before the month starts. She gives me some spicy peanuts to munch on during work, dumping a bunch in my hand when I express interest in trying just one. But when one of the supervisors walks into the back room, the peanuts she was holding are suddenly nowhere to be found, and I—probably too late—clumsily hide mine by my side. The sleight of hand involved in surreptitiously snacking during work is foreign to me, but there is a familiarity in the secret smiles the other fuwuyuan send my way when they notice me finishing up the peanuts later on. It’s okay, you’re one of us.
Sometimes I have an urge to taste a customer's leftovers before I pour its contents into the rubbish bin.

Today, I hear of a term, jianzhi, which means to work more than one job at one time. Some of my coworkers are interested in this possibility, as a way to get a larger variety of experiences. I guess compared to doing the same single type of work all day, working two different jobs can be extremely attractive. Still, I can't help but notice that the online Chinese-to-English dictionary entry for jianzhi uses the following example: “Because he had too many jobs, he eventually collapsed with exhaustion.”

When I ask one of the fuwuyuan what kind of jianzhi opportunities she might like to explore, she replies that she doesn't know, because shenme dou buhao gan. “All work is unpleasant,” and unfortunately, this might be true for her current skill-set. Maybe it's not just about boredom for those in this group; maybe some of these young people are roaming in pursuit of direction, any direction. Whether or not we have a concrete way to market ourselves, by leaving home we gain the ability to hope that someone will find worth in us.

What is like to dream when you are a minimally-earning citizen of the most populous country in the world, and when your opportunities and education growing up have always been minimal? Indeed, many of my coworkers appear more or less illiterate; if I ask someone how to write a word not used in an everyday context, chances are that they will ask the others for a reminder. Part of this occurrence probably has something to do with the fact that typing and texting in Chinese doesn't require true character recall (rather, the software is such that you can get by with simple character recognition, which is a far easier skill to develop), but not going to high school probably doesn't help, either.

An exception to this is 28-year old Alicia, who has a post behind the counter working the computer and cash register. From our conversation today about China’s economy, class stratification, and standards of living, it remains clear that she has had quite a bit of schooling (hinted at, already, by her aptitude with the English language), and I later discover that she is finishing up a college degree. She finds it shocking that I’m “only 21!” and that I’ve already

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1 As you might imagine, this was not an easy value to acquire.
had this much experiences in school, extracurricular activities, and traveling. I can’t think of how to respond, other than by saying that I’m not necessarily a representative American student. Unfortunately, because my vocabulary is weak it comes out as “I’m not a normal American,” which sounds both pretentious and awkward.

By the way, when I say that I “conversed] about China’s economy, class stratification, and standards of living,” it means that I emitted a series of stutters while talking about my research that made me come across as a really enthusiastic but dumb-as-a-rock robot which a two-hundred-word vocabulary. I continue to be amazed by the extent to which eloquence is perceived as intelligence. The other side of this coin is that one particular group of my coworkers have decided that I must be kind of dumb, since my grasp of Chinese slang is so poor. I think I now understand how study abroad students in the US must feel when Americans treat them like children just because their English speaking seems a little stilted.

Profile: Lana

One of the girls who stands by the door as a hostess is Lana, who has a tendency to move through the restaurant via a series of relaxed lounging motions. She’ll slip into the back room without any warning and then drink a few ladles of the sweet pea sugar soup, whispering, “Keep my secret!” on her way out. She also tends to touch me rather frequently, which I hope in vain is just coincidental. Overall, the aura that she carries with her is a deeply dramatic one, between her sugary smile, slightly catty features, and long, slitted dress, it’s hard to ignore her when she plops down beside you and starts blowing on your arm.

“Don’t touch me,” I ended up saying, once, but she simply replied with a laugh. Her flippancy extends to pretty much everyone, even Manager Gan, when he calls her out on not cleaning her jurisdictions properly. Apparently she is from the rural areas of Hebei, but she hides this under fairly well-orchestrated city-chic outfits. When she gives me her email address, I notice that the first part of it translates to “live in the moment,” which does fairly well characterize both Lana and many of the other young migrant workers who I meet.
And yet, despite her tendency to show up at work eating ice cream, or having eaten McDonalds¹, she strikes me as one of the more mature staff members. This might be because of how concrete and thought-out her future plans seem: she wants to work at some Audi “4S” store, knows some basic things about cars, and already can tell me what the application process is like for that company. Apparently, she found her job at our restaurant when Manager Gan found her CV online, which itself is pretty impressive.

August 20, 2010, Friday (Day 9)

When I catch Lun Zhiling yawning, Ingrid explains that “the others all went to sing karaoke last night,” but that she’d stayed behind, ostensibly to avoid the following day’s exhaustion. Remembering what I learned about secret night lives at the first restaurant, and considering how often the folks at this restaurant try to catnap during the 2-5pm break (and also complain that they are kunsile!—tired to death!), I imagine that some of them must have pretty happening schedules after the workday ends.

Then, rather out of the blue, Manager Gan taps Ingrid on the shoulders during breakfast and says, “I hadn’t known you that you were only sixteen years old.”

Who says I’m sixteen years old?” she says.

Your boyfriend called and told me, and also mentioned that you’d be coming in earlier today.” This strikes me as odd on a number of accounts.

He did not!"

Then maybe you told me,” he says, with a bit of half-grin.

Who told you that I’m sixteen?”

I told you already!”

¹ When your income is around 50RMB a day, a 10-15RMB sandwich at McDs or even a 2RMB ice cream cone suddenly sounds like a big deal.
I guess Ingrid probably isn’t eighteen, after all. When I follow her to the prep room (my usual post), I try nudging her for a little more information regarding her age. I’m in mid-tease when I realize that she’s crying.

—I don’t want… sixteen,” she says, her eyes swelling up.

—What’s wrong with being sixteen?”

—I’m not! Sixteen is xiaopihai,” she says, forcefully. I’m not sure what xiaopihai means; I can’t find it in a dictionary, though it sounds like you might translate it as —gassy little kid.” At this point, supervisor Lydia comes in to save the day:

—Look at that lip,” she says. —You could pour soy sauce off of it.” I don’t know what this is supposed to mean, either, but Ingrid cracks a little smile.

—Someone calls you a xiaopihai and you cry?” says Lydia, once she gets Ingrid to explain why she’s upset. After a few more exchanges like this, it’s just a matter of time before Ingrid is suddenly good as new, laughing like usual.

—What’s with you, crying then, and laughing now,” continues the wispy-haired supervisor, who presently walks out of the room. That’s the entire exchange, and the no-longer-crying and I get back to work. At one point in the early afternoon, I realize that I get an odd sense of joy from watching customers’ faces when I bring food out to them, specifically when they look at a given dish with awe or pleasant surprise. In a similar way, I find I resent those who stare passively at a dish as if it’s not good enough, or something.

Watching some of the fuwuyuan tap away on their cellphones for almost the entire duration of their break hours, I finally admit that the social space of QQ confounds me: my coworkers constantly message and chat with friends back home, people in Beijing, and people whom they —might know.” Is this a brand of high-speed cyberdating? Is QQ usage something bigger than instant messengers ever were in the United States?

* * *
Speaking of dating, I make my way back to my old restaurant today and find that Jen, the youngest *fuwuyuan* there, has found herself a boyfriend. As I sit in the dining area near the counter, she vents about him and about her work. I ask her what her dreams are; she grins and says that she wants to be a pop star. Apparently, her boyfriend wants her to get a job in clothing sales or cosmetics, not because the work is better, but because he thinks it’ll make her more fashionable. She giggles at this, and then complains that he’ll be visiting home (in three-hour-away Hebei province) for a few days. She doesn’t want to be apart from him for *that long*.

When I get a chance to talk to Mao for a moment, she straightens her glasses and tells me that in the future, she’d like to find a job in TV broadcasting.

→You mean, like writing scripts for the news?” I say.

→Anything in that field,” she says, and looks off to the side, suggesting that she hopes my questions won’t get any more specific.

The last person I speak to at my old restaurant is Mrs. Boss, and we actually talk for quite a while. She’s from Anhui province, which is interesting, since Anhui is a lot closer to Shanghai than to Beijing. Maybe my assumptions for why migrant workers choose one city over another are overgeneralized. I don’t have a chance to ask her, because she starts telling me about how she was a cook for most of her life, and how back in her day, cooking was far more difficult. In those pre-gas stove days, they used coal stoves which had to be used up all in one sitting, so restaurants would be open only for a few hours at a time, like from 11am to 2pm.

Mrs. Boss talks about an older Beijing, where even fifteen years ago, one could find far more affordable housing, and how the area by the fourth ring road (close to where our restaurant is now) was all farms. Today, you won’t find farming areas unless you’re out by the sixth or seventh ring roads, she says, and believes that in another ten years, those communities will become part of the city, as well. This strikes me as doubtful, but maybe I just don’t understand how urban expansion really works, how city limits are defined, and how far a municipality can stretch before small, suburban communities start to grow out of it. After all, ten years in Beijing time is a lot of years of change.
One thing that has changed about our morning and afternoon meetings as of late is that we haven’t been doing the miniature English lessons for a while, where I go up front and read a list of words for the others to repeat. This has entirely to do with the fact that Manager Dao hasn’t been around for the last few days; it turns out that he had had a stroke, and has since gone down south to recover.

This means that meetings are a bit shorter than they were, though Manager Gan still manages to come up with new directives that have me scrambling for my notepad. At this particular afternoon meeting, he begins by reminding us that we take more responsibility for our work, and then recommends that we get health insurance, if at all possible.

―When you’re young, you’re trading in your health for money,” he says. ―When you’re old, it’s reversed: money is spent to buy health.” He suggests ―something modest,” like 1000RMB of insurance each year. This advice seems ridiculous for me on a number of accounts. First of all, it is my educated understanding that 1000RMB of insurance will only bring you a certain amount of healthcare. Secondly, 1000RMB is almost a month’s pay, a sum that my coworkers could use to purchase a really nice, fancy phone and still have change left over. It seems extremely improbable that any of the fuwuyuan at this restaurant would even consider cashing in that much money for partial protection against possibly getting sick.

After my day at work, I go to visit Aunt Wendy at her house for the evening. Aunt Wendy (no blood relation) is a friend of my mother’s, so when the former had heard that I would be in Beijing for this summer, she insisted that I stop by for dinner sometime, and here I am. Visiting her middle-upper class home is a striking experience; the evening is surreally like being back in the Midwestern United States. From the conversation over dinner (pork dumplings), I realize that this family is able to go for international travel, survive on the income of a single parent, own a piano (and a guitar, and arrange for lessons for their son), have the time to go to church, use a great camera to take bad pictures of their son playing hockey and soccer, and hire a maid to do cooking and cleaning.
Aunt Wendy and her husband own this apartment, two cars, and possess a Beijing hukou. The hukou refers to the household registration system used in China, and it provides some identifying information about you, particularly about the area (usually a province) of which you are officially a resident.

I've always heard that it's beneficial to have a big city hukou, and Aunt Wendy's husband tries to help me understand why this is the case. Basically, with a Beijing hukou, 1) you can own more than one property in Beijing, 2) you have more privileges as a high school student, including having a better chance of getting into the top universities in Beijing, and 3) you receive more travel freedoms to places like Hong Kong. A Beijing hukou can be acquired either 1) by birth, or 2) if you help the city in some significant way, like if you manage to start a business that brings the city a large amount of tax revenue.

Aunt Wendy's husband seems pretty happy with his life; in between swallows of dumpling, he talks to me in comfortable, jolly tone. He works as some sort of marketing agent in a company that sells medical equipment, looks at me with small, deeply-set eyes, and speaks in fairly polished, easy-to-understand Chinese. I find myself wondering whether I am looking into the face of the Chinese version of the American Dream. How far are the low-wage migrant workers from starting middle-class, furniture-buying, single-income families?

**Profile: Lun Zhiling**

Lun Zhiling has, uniquely, probably the only consistently timely sense of fashion in the restaurant (referring, that is, to her outfits when she isn't wearing her actual work uniform). She works as one of the hostesses, where she stands with her tender, slightly worried smile. Tall, and frighteningly thin, she actually takes an active interest in fashion, which I discover when I see her reading through a magazine and pointing out that she likes a certain model's look. She also hocks mucous more often than anyone I've ever met in my life, which is a bit startling. Imagine a tall, girl in a long slender magenta dress with a slit up to the thigh bending over a garbage can and then spitting into it like a bona fide cab driver.
Her coordinating Bermuda shorts and clean, sporty polo stand out a lot more when contrasted with what the others tend to wear, such as t-shirts with shiny graphics and meaningless English (e.g. "NO MORE WAR fashion fashion fashion strong tough I can't decide won't be anymore fand razer queensborough") on top of overbleached jean shorts and lace sneakers. However, when I ask Lun Zhiling if she'd like to go into fashion design, she replies with a repeated, very modest "nononono."

"I don’t have that much faith in myself," she says. One day, when I ask her how she’s doing, she tells me that she’s feeling physically fine, but her heart is uncomfortable. I go out on a limb and ask her who she lives with, since I know she doesn’t stay in the group dorm.

"I live with… my laogong," she says, tentatively. Laogong means "husband," but sometimes girls will use the term to describe their boyfriend.

"Oh, you mean your boyfriend?" I say, accordingly.

"No, he’s my husband," she says, which is kind of embarrassing for me. When I congratulate her on her marriage (begun about one year ago), she smiles dryly.

"Jiehun buhao," she says, which frustratingly could be translated either as "marriage is bad," or "my marriage is bad." Why? Because you lose a lot of freedom, she explains, freedom to do what you want, to say what you want. She goes onto lament how she has to be careful around her in-laws.

Lun Zhiling used to work at a factory in Suzhou, and then worked for a whole year in a Beijing factory. She says that it wasn’t actually so bad, that she had freedom, could listen to music, and just had to put in really long hours. Her husband is a security guard of some kind. She doesn’t appear to have any particular future plans to change her career. Later in the month that I spend at Purple Jade, she develops a tendency to answer all of my questions with, simply, "buhao," or "not good."

August 24-25, 2010 (Days 11-12)

Someone recently asked me whether the low wage workers with whom I interact are unhappy. It's a tough question to evaluate, but as my days here at Purple Jade begin to grow longer, and the freshness of the work seems to fade all at once, I start getting a better feel for how I might answer. Some of the most unforgettable mental images that I will collect in the space of just a couple days are of Lydia curling up in a ball in the back room for no apparent reason, of Ingrid pouting darkly as she slouches against the dumbwaiter, of Little Ming's eyes shaped like teardrops, aimed out the window across the room as she stands on duty, despondently waiting for a customer to shout, fuwuyuan!

Yes, they are unhappy. By no means do I believe this to be the whole story of their lives, but it seems that working in a setting such as this doesn't just exhaust these individuals, it ages them. When I am assigned to help set up the new (less expensive) girls' dorm (which is located further away from the restaurant), I arrive at the new facility only to realize that about sixteen girls will be sharing a tiny, sordid kitchen and a tiny, nauseating bathroom.

And when in a moment of hunger I joke about ordering some food from our own menu, I am surprised to hear Chang Meikang reprimand me with complete seriousness.

―Don't—it's too expensive,” she says, her eyes suddenly oddly deep. “I mean, for 15 RMB, instead of getting those little cakes, you could buy a lot of instant noodle.” I began to scold myself for my insensitivity but instead find the self-critique overshadowed by the realization that she finds 15RMB—2USD—too much for what I was planning on ordering.

Wolf Lang and I are sent back to the new girls' dorm the next day to assemble bunk beds, which takes a few hours. The beds are, unfortunately, not the easy-fit sort of light metal structures you might find at IKEA; instead, sometimes they require Wolf Lang to slam his body weight against the frames in order to get them to fall into place right. I learn that he is 27 years old, and from the northwest of China, which explains his unusually thick northern accent. Unfortunately, his scrunched word pronunciation is exacerbated by a somewhat haphazard
approach to the tones which are so critical to listening comprehension, so I find myself constantly asking for clarifications.

When we eventually get back to the restaurant, Manager Gan rewards us with a large bottle of Coca-Cola to split between ourselves. As we sip the cola, Wolf Lang lifts his glass and mutters something through a grin. It turns out that “everyone knows” that drinking too much coke is bad for a man’s sperm cells. This twist in the conversation takes me by surprise, but it explains why one of the fuwuyuan had called out to him, “Not too much, Wolf Lang, you’re not as young as you once were!”

As the buzz of the coke settles, I ask him how a given romantic couple can get time to be intimate together, since the dorms are totally void of privacy (we had just set up 7 bunks in a single room).

“Hotels,” he says, and it makes me think of the grody little hotels I’ve seen that probably charge around 10-20RMB per night. I guess now I have an idea of who might patronize them.

Profile: Alicia

I don’t meet Alicia for all of a couple weeks, probably because she works behind a counter that my job seldom has anything to do with. She’s from Shaanxi, and once worked in a bookstore there for some time.

“Things could be worse,” she says. “I’m in the capital, now.” She reports that the pay is the same between Beijing and the last city where she worked, except things tend to be more expensive here. Currently, she is studying to finish her bachelor’s degree, which involves writing a thesis during her fourth year, during which she apparently does not need to attend any classes. Her focus is in accounting, and she hopes to start up her own company after a few years working elsewhere. She stresses the need to find good work that values skill before she gets too old, since it’s hard to get hired as a fuwuyuan if you don’t look young anymore.
"Having money is key,” she says, and then surprises me by continuing, “If you want to be able to do something for your country’s development, if you want to contribute, you’ve got to have to have money first, so you have something to stand on.” When I asked Alicia whether she is able to save much money (or even send some home), she replies as if dazed.

“Save? I don’t have enough money to spend, much less save,” she says. What does she spend her money on? “Food and snacks, cosmetics, my phone, occasionally medicine, and transportation.”

During one of our last conversations, Alicia allows herself to dream aloud a little, and says that she hopes that her future children will at least go to college, and thereby have a way to make a living that isn’t too bitter. At the same time, she wants to let them have freedom of choice as to what they’d like to pursue, which makes me feel like she is somehow unifying traditional values (e.g. get lots of education) with modern ideas (e.g. you can do anything you like).

**August 26, 2010, Thursday, Day 13**

Our new coworker goes by Kyla. I remember seeing her come in yesterday to apply for a server position. I never got a chance to get a feel for what she was like; when I carried a mop past where she was sitting, she leaned away and averted her eyes as if I had threatened to slap her with it.

Actually, there were two people who came in yesterday to look for work. The other was an older woman (around forty?), who was trimly dressed in a floral blouse and expressed an interest in dishwashing. I watched a sitting Manager Gan tell her in short, truncated sentences that yes, we were still hiring. I didn’t get to hear much of their (fairly protracted) conversation, but at one point I overheard her whisper something along the lines of, “That’s quite low… I thought rates had increased?”
She later left with a semi-apologetic, "I'll give it some thought," which suggested to me that I would probably never see her again. And sure enough, this older woman is nowhere to be seen today, while Kyla has already begun taking over some morning cleaning tasks.

At the morning meeting, Manager Gan charges us with a question: Do we have rensheng jihua, ["life plans"]?

"Today, you're a waiter," he says, raising and dropping his hands with small, quick motions. "Tomorrow, do you still want to be a waiter? You've got to have a dream." There are bits of his speech that aren't quite clear to me, such as his talking about how most people don't choose to go into foodservice, but those who do end up with good opportunities."

"Back in the day," he says, "People would have to go as far as using guanxi [connections] to get work in a restaurant. I hope you all can be here because you choose to be. Believe in yourselves. I believe in you." And that is the manager's way of encouraging us to work harder. He ends by suggesting that the opportunities for advancement in a restaurant really do exist. You just have to work hard for two, three, five years, working "as if you owned the place," and… who knows?

Because we both work in the beicanjian back room, I get to know the short, round-faced Kyla better as we dry dishes, put chopsticks in sleeves, and take turns filling bowls of rice. I learn that she'd gotten married in April, and is the mother of a one-year old, which surprises me, since she looks only barely twenty years old. She does acknowledge, with a bit of a conspiratorial smile, that she'd gotten pregnant before she was married.

"Where do you live?" I say.

"We live in a nearby subdivision," she says, staring me down with a grin that makes me wonder why she seemed so shy yesterday. She tells me that they own bikes, that she's from Shandong, that her husband is from Hebei, and that the two of them met while at work. Her child is living back home in Shandong, presumably with her family.

I'll admit that I kind of dislike Kyla, for some reason. While we work, she waxes verbose about her previous experiences at other restaurants and constantly questions the way we do
things at Purple Jade. On the other hand, I guess she’s not the first to stubbornly continue drying dishes her way or pack rice the way she prefers—as we’ve seen, even some of our supervisors ignore the Managers’ instructions. Kyla says that she had also tried working at a fast food restaurant before this one, but felt that it was too difficult and ended up leaving after a half day.

I’ve also noticed that she instinctively hides her phone when the door to our beicanjian opens while she’s texting. I suppose there are some skills that you don’t have to teach.

* * *

After work, I stop by Tan’s fruit store. He now makes a 20-25% profit on his produce, and has brought in his younger brother (who happens to be a freelancing repairman) to help out and keep an eye on things. The place now looks a lot more set up, as does Tan’s shopkeeper’s mind: he exhibits his new knowledge of the business as he extols the importance of customer relationships, and then reiterates the beauties of being free and on his own. He believes that he’ll be able to pay off his loans by some point next year.

Before I leave, he sets me up with a lot of fruit, and refuses to let me pay him any more than the absolute minimum price for it.

—We don’t have much time before you have to head back to the United States,” he says, —And we have a lot of yuanfen, you know?” A lot of destiny. I love the idea, and am happy to listen to him talk about this and other topics, such as how he tries to save money by skipping meals. He offers to make me dinner sometime, and I note with some interest the empty beer bottles sitting around his little alcove, as well as the fact that he has a laptop with an internet connection. I definitely wasn’t expecting to see that in a fruit seller’s one-room home.

Before we part, he gives me some parting information about restaurants: –80% of the big ones are bad, because the more employees a manager has, the more they benefit from skimping a little bit on each one.” I thank him again, gather up my fruit, and head for the bus stop.

August 27-September 1, 2010 (Days 14-17)
I never really give a lot of thought to how much I spend on everyday expenses whenever I’m in China; this probably has something to do with the fact that the currency exchange obscures a lot of the financial clarity that I carefully wield while I’m in the United States. As such, it takes me a moment to appreciate what Chang Meikang means when she says that some of the fuwuyuan spend as much as 200-300RMB on their cellphone fees each month. That’s almost a third of their income.

—Yeah, some of us use our phones a lot,” she says, matter-of-factly, “Especially those who have significant others.”

Another thought-provoking moment that I encounter in my final days at Purple Jade comes from an expatriate friend of mine, Tim, whom I met at church.

—What can I do to improve the lives of low-wage workers in Beijing?” he asks. It throws me that I’ve never considered this question, at least not in view of personal action possibilities. He wonders whether it is appropriate to tip for excellent service. Tipping is not something that happens very often in China; even the classiest restaurants do not generally expect a voluntary tip, but will rather include an obligatory service charge. I try and fail to imagine what would happen if a group of people in Beijing tried to start a culture of tipping.

On my second-to-last day at work, Wolf Lang gifts to me a slender, steel lighter that is ornamented with a little ram’s head insignia.

—I know you don’t smoke,” he says, which makes the parting gift all the more humorous and meaningful, “But maybe it’s something you can play with sometimes.”

When I ask my coworkers if they are willing to take some pictures with me, I soon get the impression that they are generally averse to having their photo taken while they are wearing their work uniforms. I guess I don’t blame them—in this last month, I have experienced how these uniforms not only erase our identities, but in this setting, uniforms also give us a special appearance that tells customers that we aren’t quite persons worthy of any thought.

No, we’re just fuwuyuan.

* * *
When I next visit Tan’s fruit stall, I find him looking unusually depressed. It turns out that someone threw a brick through his window, and he has no idea who it might be.

—It could be my competitors, or gangsters,” he says. —Who knows. And no, the police are useless in these situations.

A week later, however, a second brick went through his window, and this time he ran out with his fruit knife and chased the offender deep into some alleys before losing him.

—What would you have done if you caught him?” I ask, my eyes widening.

—I would have chopped him to death,” he says, and his jaw sets.

The next day, someone showed up, and asked for 3000RMB as a gang —protection fee.” Pay the one-time sum, and no one will bother you again, he’d said. Tan tells me that the man was someone holding a baby, and wearing a chain. There is a name for these folks: ditoushe, which means —snake in its old haunts,” connoting the local villain.

—You can’t beat them,” says Tan, —You need guanxi, you gotta have a strong history, gotta have friends in high places if you want to avoid trouble with these types.” He sighs. —There exist few people of true quality.”

**September 2, 2010, Thursday (Day 18)**

Perhaps there is a symbolism to be drawn from how today was probably the hardest day of work I ever endured in my weeks here at Purple Jade. Why shouldn’t my last day be the one where I most flavorfully experience the taste of feeling frustrated, squashed, rushed, harried, harassed, underappreciated, and just all-over tired and sore?

Eventually, however, Manager Gan instructs me to meet him at the front counter at five o’clock, after our meeting. As if his intention isn’t already obvious enough, he performs a crude hand gesture where the thumb and first two fingers are rubbed together briskly, and says, in
English, “Mah-nee.” In the end, my salary for the three weeks adds up to 480RMB ($70), which is pretty fair for someone who only worked forty hours per week.

* * *

The goodbyes were sweet. To prevent the day from becoming too tragic, I promised to stop by at least once more before leaving the country, but each handshake still felt like something to be remembered. Ironically, however, what I remember is how rough their hands were. You never expect that a young girl, no more than twenty years old, fresh-faced and chipper, will have the hands of an old woman. Lun Zhiling gave me a bag of chocolate marshmallows as a goodbye present.

—Hope you like candy,” she said, looking away a bit. Chang Meikang had gotten me an egg biscuit from the street while she was on break. From another of my coworkers, a tangerine. And from Manager Gan, a poem that he had copied down on parchment using Chinese calligraphy.

After the short meeting, I said my final goodbyes, which were more often than not just extended, wordless looks, as each of my coworkers and I tried to prolong our farewell but didn’t quite have the words or the social equipment to do so.

Other than the roughness of their hands, I hope one other mental image will stick with me, and that is the picture of just watching them, seeing them as kids as they messed around on the second floor before we had our afternoon meeting. Seeing them still in their everyday clothes, I could really see how human they were, so full of vibrancy, of reality, or individuality, even as they hit each other, shoved marshmallows into each other’s mouths, called each other names, shared food, shared laughs…

As I left, I glimpsed Lun Zhiling standing at her post in the window. I was going to miss them.
**Epilogue**

A few days before leaving Beijing that summer, I met up with Namgyel, a good friend of mine from North Central College who had recently arrived to begin his fall term abroad in China. Namgyel is originally from Bhutan, a small country in south Asia that is actually bordered on the north by the western part of China. Bhutan is uniquely the only country in the world that uses Gross National Happiness (or GNH) as its chief economic indicator.

As we conversed in his dorm, Namgyel told me that in Bhutan, poverty and happiness are not mutually exclusive factors. It was at that moment that I first realized that for all my classes and college studies geared towards opening my mind up to new ideas, I have a lot of difficulty reconciling my mind with the idea that one can be happy without at least a certain measure of wealth. How could you be happy if you were really poor?

"I think they are just satisfied," said Namgyel, and his explanation sounded both immensely appealing and suspiciously oversimplified. Is happiness simply born out of a culture of contentment? This conversation with Namgyel was not unlike another that I would later have with my thesis director and advisor, Dr. Matthew Krystal, wherein he exhorted me to avoid the kind of thinking that goes, "Oh, how terrible it is to be poor!"

Rather, Dr. Krystal suggested I look into the nature of family and community in relation to how people function in poverty, and it seemed like this was another part of the answer to the question I had for Namgyel. When we better understand the strengths that a community can invest in the individual—a system of reciprocity and mutual aid, perhaps—we start to see better models of the challenges that those individuals are facing.

Applying these concepts to the folks I met in this study may be one helpful way to consider their situations, both economically and in terms of life satisfaction. For example, contentment is one of the last words I would use to describe most of my young migrant worker friends, and yet the systems of reciprocity and mutual aid that Dr. Krystal described sometimes sounded a lot like the community of the restaurant that I had experienced.

I recall one more conversation that I had had some months ago with Dr. Robert Moussetis, who is affectionately known to his students as "Moose." On a plane en route to a research
conference in Missoula, he leaned across the aisle and began describing China’s market system from, specifically, the perspective of a business strategist.

—Their government is focused on the happiness of the Chinese people,” Moose had said, —And as long as the people are making money, they’ll be happy, and the government can avoid a revolution.” This argument seems congruent with my experiences on a couple fronts; I have generally found the Chinese people to be approving of their government in the last few years, and unemployment rates do not appear to be a large concern in Beijing. However, a tension exists between this prosperity-driven happiness and the happiness afforded to those individuals with family- or community-centric lives.

That is to say, unless the community of the workplace suffices to provide this social advantage of mutual support, it appears that China’s low wage migrant workers may be forfeiting the benefits of family cooperation in order to obtain the advantages offered by employment in the city. Whether the pursuit of economic success and the stability provided by the home are comparable as measures of happiness is, of course, somewhat unclear. However, it remains a sobering idea that such a tradeoff may be occurring at all. Certain individuals come to mind, like those workers I met who for their work are separated from their very young children.

Ultimately, and in the shadow of these academic considerations, a simpler question persists: are the migrant workers happy? Yet, and admittedly speaking from just one month’s experience, it seems that happiness may not be of the greatest concern to the second generation of low-wage migrant workers. Rather, I observed that my coworkers seemed to fear boredom more than they feared toil or hardship, and that they delighted more in entertainment—from their phones, from high-carbohydrate snacking, from teasing each other—than from the pursuit of self-actualization. My inquiries regarding what they wanted to do after working in the restaurant were shrugged off with an ease that made me begin to question my approach. After all, aren’t middle-class American kids just as seemingly purposeless, despite the boons of constant opportunity and even secondary education?

Talking to a couple of my coworkers from the second restaurant on QQ instant messenger, I discovered that within a few months of my working there, most of the fuwuyuan had met had
all resigned. Xing Xing remained, but was about to leave, Chang Meikang was still working there, and Lana had been promoted to supervisor. But even Manager Gan had moved on, along with all of the other supervisors. At the first restaurant, a phone call to Mrs. Boss (punctuated with shouts to and from the kitchen) revealed that after a half year of my leaving Beijing, all four of the *fuwuyuan* who I’d known had been “switched out,” and that only Chef Kao remained in the kitchen.

Finally, in June 2011, Chef Tan told me over the phone that he had run into some difficulties, was no longer working at a fruit stand, and, in fact, was not currently working at all. Like Mrs. Boss, he heartily welcomed me to visit him in Beijing, and then inquired about my well-being.

“So do you have any plans for the upcoming days?” I said, and I heard what for anyone else I would have interpreted as hesitation. For Tan, pauses are always for dramatic effect.

“There are some things,” he said, “That you can’t plan. They’re unplannables, and I believe that I am one of them.”

Talking to Tan reminds me of how my interests and the aim of my research were never so much geared toward happiness or even about market forces in urban China, but rather sought to know and better understand the motivations that drive the movement of this particular people group. Clearly, from the rate of turnover at these two restaurants, they are moving, if only from one line of temporary work to another. But somehow, Tan’s reluctance to micromanage his future spoke for many in his cohort; each for different reasons, most of the individuals with whom I had worked during the summer of 2010 did not want, see a need, or feel themselves in a place to project their expectations on the times to come.

Instead, it worked for them to be working, and they were excited to work somewhere else soon. Perhaps for now, that is all the movement that these workers seek, all the movement that they need to remain migrant workers.

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