

My father and I had been discussing me visiting China again. But when? And where? And how? And why? When I was offered the visiting fellowship in Freiburg, China got a lot closer, and a lot cheaper to reach, and with a Christmas break. Why not? We decided to meet in Chengdu, so that I could see another part of the country. Dad took the train and arrived a day ahead of me. I took a plane, then the airport shuttle, then a city bus. When I hopped off the airport shuttle, I saw this enormous statue of Chairman Mao. I'm told that there aren't many of these in China, but when it's the first thing I encounter, and the central attraction of a major city, I have to wonder.



We stayed in a semi-private room in a hostel, to save money and so that we didn't have to share with people who snore or drink or get sick and hog the bathroom. All of those were my jobs. We were both most impressed by the shower design, and between the two of us, we took about twenty pictures of the shower. I considered giving the shower its own travelogue, but that could have been too much. Let's all take a moment to appreciate the drainage ditch around the edge of the floor of the shower.



We also enjoyed the unfinished construction project next to the hostel. No construction seemed to be in progress while we were there, but people were living in the little trailers and bringing back takeout and hanging out their laundry to dry. No one we talked to seemed to know anything about this building. We probably should have asked one of the people who lived in it. We appreciated the ease of getting around Chengdu. We could get on the subway and within a few minutes be within a few blocks of where we wanted to go. It was cheap and easy.





For Christmas, we went to the main panda (*Ailuropoda melanoleuca*)-breeding facility in Chengdu. The research facility started in 1987 with six pandas, and they've grown from there. The facility that's available to visitors is basically a zoo for pandas, with all of the oohing and ahing expected from young Chinese women making cutesy noises whenever a panda moves. Because the place is a research facility, I was hoping that I'd come off with as much information about breeding pandas as anyone has at this point in time, but the information available to visitors is of the generic birds-and-bees type. So it was helpful that there were some other animals around, including this bird, who is not part of the breeding program or the zoo.





Chengdu Characters, 2018-2019: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

I'm not finding good bird-identification resources for China online. Naturalism is not a common hobby in that part of the world. So I'll just call this guy Marcus.



Chengdu Characters, 2018-2019: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

We were both impressed with the enormous molars that pandas have. The better to grind bamboo with, my dear. The large loops in the skull make the pandas' heads wider than North American bears' heads, and seem to contribute to the cuteness factor.





The pandas were mostly dozing while we were at the breeding facility. They climb up something, higher if they're smaller, and drape themselves over something and go to sleep.





Larger bears are less enthusiastic climbers. The structures in the enclosures appear to be built to facilitate the preferred napping position.



Chengdu Characters, 2018-2019: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

I always enjoy a good nap, so I decided to try out the panda position, just for variety, by draping myself over a fence. I prefer napping horizontally.





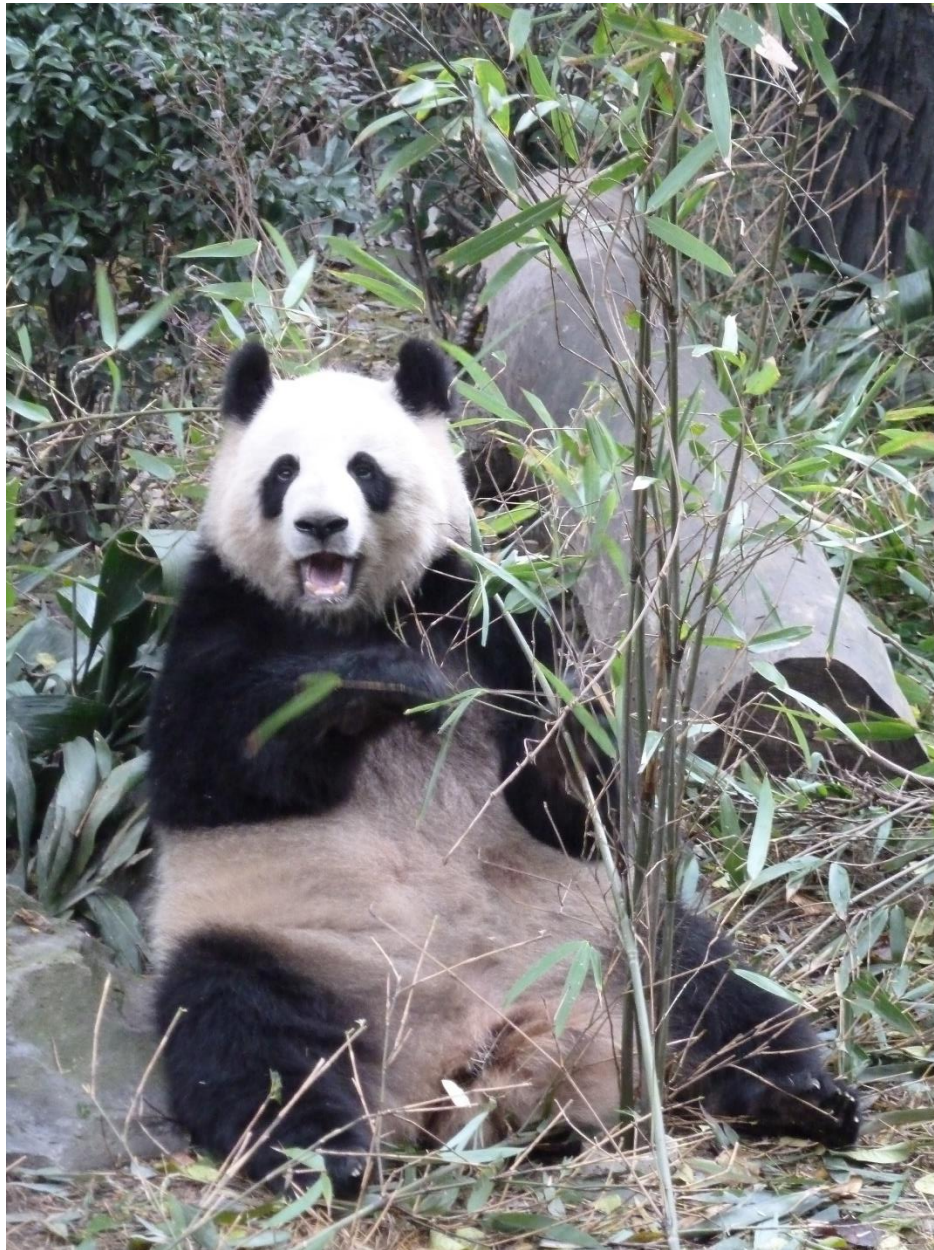
Chengdu Characters, 2018-2019: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

Red pandas (*Ailurus fulgens*) do things, including each other, so breeding them in captivity has been easier than for the giant pandas.





Pandas have an interesting pelvic structure that lets them roll directly from quadrupedal locomotion to lounging on their lower backs without having to rotate to the side. This one was lounging for lunch.



No visit to a breeding facility would have been complete without a look at the working parts.





We took a day off to nap and do laundry and generally loaf about, and then we went into the Wide and Narrow Alley (Kuanzhai Xiangzi) to see what's left of the mostly rebuilt pre-World-War-II Chengdu. On the way, a machine at the subway station ate a large chunk of money and refused to provide either a ticket or change. The very nice guy at the machine next to me had been paying attention and went and fetched a subway employee, who refunded my money and put an "out of order" sign (in Mandarin, of course) on the machine I'd been using. I bought a ticket at the next machine over and thanked the guy next to me (in Mandarin, of course). The lanterns hang over the main entrance to the mostly rebuilt few blocks of Chengdu.





One of my favorite things about Mandarin-translated-into-English are the streams of nouns. I'm sure that the Mandarin phrase above the English works. I'm not sure what to do with the English, but I really like it. When streams of nouns happen in English, by English speakers, I can usually make sense of them: credit card credit limit increase acceptance form, for example. I don't think they're great writing, but I can figure out how they work. There must be the same way to figure out how these work when brought over from Mandarin, but that's a project for another day.



Chengdu Characters, 2018-2019: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

The official musician of this store taught me some techniques and played Jingle Bells (among other pieces).



This is my favorite of the recurring opera roles in the Peking/Beijing opera. There are four main types of opera characters, Sheng, Jing, Chou, and Dan: this is a Ching/Jing named Guan Yu, and the Ching/Jing usually have a supernatural power, in this case blending modern technology with early history (Guan Yu was a real person who was militarily active in the early 200s) via opera. Guan Yu had to go on the run for defending people from a bully. After five-ish years of exile, he met members of the royal family of the Han Dynasty and was upwardly mobile from there. Some people still worship him.





I want to be a Peking opera character if I grow up, either that or a giraffe, so we asked around. Eventually, after some excellent tea and some live music, we found a place that was willing to decorate me like an opera character for about \$100. But that's too much. Okay, \$70. Eh, still too much. Really, \$60 is as low as we can go. Let's walk away. Okay, okay, \$40. Make it \$30, and we'll stay. Yeah, we can do that.



Here I am as a Dan (any female character), specifically Zhengdan/Qingyi. It's surprisingly difficult to pose as operatic nobility, but the photographer kept trying. I was like a star in a stop-action film, waiting around to be rearranged and then trying to hold still until the pictures were taken.





Tragedia/Comedia



I wanted to wear my makeup to the opera in the evening, thinking maybe I could get a discount for coming in costume. But then I thought that I should probably take the makeup off before I had an incredible skin reaction to whatever might have been in the makeup. This was the cloth after the first swipe.





Dragons are ubiquitous in Chinese imagery around the country, at least in the places I have visited. Dragons participated in the creation of the world, and most of the dragons were good, but some dragons were jealous of the main creator and flooded the creation. The creator, Nu Kua, had to come back and fix things. Women seem to be always cleaning up, even when they're deities. But the rest of the dragons provided protection and education to the remaining people. Sometimes, if people are particularly capable, they can be remade as dragons. Such is what happened to the Yellow Emperor (more on him later). I'm not sure if he became a god before or after he became a dragon, or if being a god and a dragon can be done at the same time.

I spent Christmas with the pandas and didn't send Christmas cards, but if I had sent cards, this dragon would have been my choice for the cards. Merry Christmas.



Then to the opera. The plot worked about as well as any opera plot. There were three warring factions, and one outsider who might have been able to defeat the faction leaders or bring them together. I wasn't sure which. And there was a love interest, who betrayed the potential hero and ran off with one of the factionalists. For some reason, this guy was blowing fire. We got an excellent example of the difference between an ending and a conclusion. The opera ended, but I'm not sure it concluded.





The Peking Opera (Peking is Cantonese; Beijing is Mandarin) is world-famous for face-changing. I didn't know what that meant, but here are the pictures. The faces change colors, almost instantaneously. Now I want to know how, and what the face-changing means in the plot, such as it is. There are even puppets whose faces get changed.



At the end, everybody comes out and takes their bows. I have a new career goal to add to being an opera character or a giraffe. Now I also want to design costumes and do makeup for Chinese opera and/or science fiction movies and shows.





We didn't take a day off before going out to Qingcheng Shan. It's known as one of the birth places of Taoism, and the place where the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi) studied. Most people who study get some kind of diploma. The Yellow Emperor got deified. Makes me wonder if I got my money's worth on the student loans.



Winter was in progress while we were visiting, and our guides for the day were even more excited about the season than we were. We've seen winter. In their years of being tour guides, they had never seen the mountain set out so decorously. We did not get a discount because the tour guides were more excited than we were. We were excited about the mountain, and the day, and the snow was the frosting on the cake. We were all excited to be there.





The mountain is hikeable. Several trails can be used to reach the top, but the trails are not maintained in the winter, and even the level trails around the lake were covered in ice. It was an exciting day, for many reasons. We didn't fall, but we did watch gravity and ice conspire against other people. In the winter, it's safer to take the cable car almost to the top and walk/slide from there.



It's difficult to slide uphill, but we managed it, and visited a temple on the way, one of the many on the mountain. One of the rooms has sculptures in psychedelic colors of important figures in the history of Taoism. I like the guy who looks like a rabbit swallowed him, and I wish the picture of the guy with the arms coming out of his eyes had turned out better. And I really wish I could have met more of these people in person.





I think this one is a Qilin: the hooves are not dragon feet. They show up when a great person (sage, emperor, whatever form of greatness) is coming into or going from life. Usually, the qilin has antlers, so this one isn't quite canonical. Maybe something else. There's a pattern in China of making mythical beasts by combining parts from four real beings, maybe a deer, a snake, a lion, and horse. That would explain this one. The qilin symbolize everything that is culturally valued: security, prosperity, success, longevity, and fertility. The qilin sometimes bring babies. Qilin or stork? Pick a hemisphere.



Chengdu Characters, 2018-2019: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

At the top of the mountain is a pavilion, the Laojun pavilion. I would call it a pagoda. Pavilions can be rented for picnics in state parks. There are eight layers because eight is the luckiest number in much of China.





Chengdu Characters, 2018-2019: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

As usual when I make it a point to reach a high point, the fog rolled in, and the view disappeared. In theory, one can see the foothills of the Himalayas from the top of Qingcheng Shan. Not the day I was there. But frosty, snow-covered trees look good in the fog.

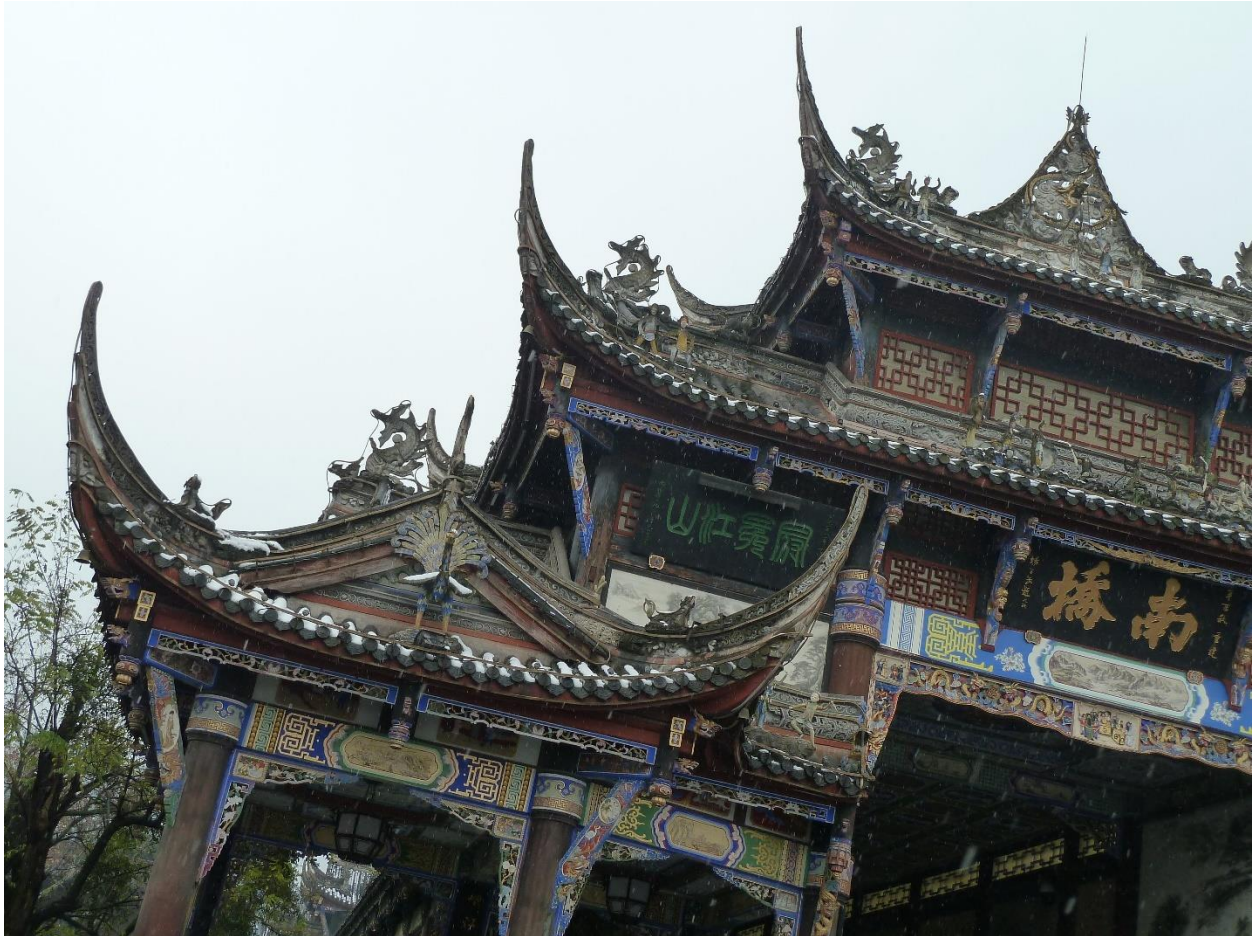


While snow was available, people made various snow creatures. This one is a snow panda. The snow man had six-pack abs, by the way.





Then we went to the Dujiangyan water works. There was also this especially pointy roof, at the entrance to the area. Why pointy roofs? My father has a theory: the roofs were built to imitate a certain kind of tent structure. When there wasn't enough leather for the roof at some point in history, the builders carried on with the style, but it darn well better look like leather on a pike.



Chengdu Characters, 2018-2019: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

Also in the area: some ancient engravings on stone. Petroglyphs! My father can hardly avoid them, at least when roaming the countryside with me. These are old forms of characters, but the meaning is ambiguous. My father has a theory about this, too: the older characters exist primarily so that scholars of ancient Chinese writing have something to work on.





Li Bing, a governor and engineer in the pre-Christian era, made the Dujiangyan water management system to control flooding and enable irrigation. The system has been self-maintaining for over two millennia. It flushes out silt, keeps supply for the irrigation system steady, and funnels excess water in directions where it won't do damage. The project made Sichuan the breadbasket of China. The earthquake in 2008 damaged a levee, but the system still works. There's still not a great explanation for how all of this works, but...



... my father has a theory. He's probably right, but we couldn't agree on which direction the water was flowing while we were standing there looking at it. This is the fish head levee.





Chengdu Characters, 2018-2019: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

The way the currents are managed also affects the locations of fish in the river. The birds might not be able to explain the currents, but they are adept at using the outcomes.



Chengdu Characters, 2018-2019: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

We walked all around, looked at the water in various places, crossed several bridges, and looked at the signs and images available. This is a schematic map of the rivers that flow from the high peaks of the Himalayas across the Tibetan plateau to the Dujiangyan water works. In the upper right corner, the image shows the bridge from the visitor center to the fish-head levee. Then there are hundreds of kilometers across the plateau. The scale is logarithmic.





Back in Chengdu, we had a day of roaming around in the city. We went to the central square, where the Mao statue is. There is also an abstracted dragon sculpture, and a replica of the Eiffel Tower. There are many roof-top Eiffel Towers in Chengdu, and my father says that they are almost as common as dragons. I managed to squeeze four of them into one picture. That wasn't this picture.



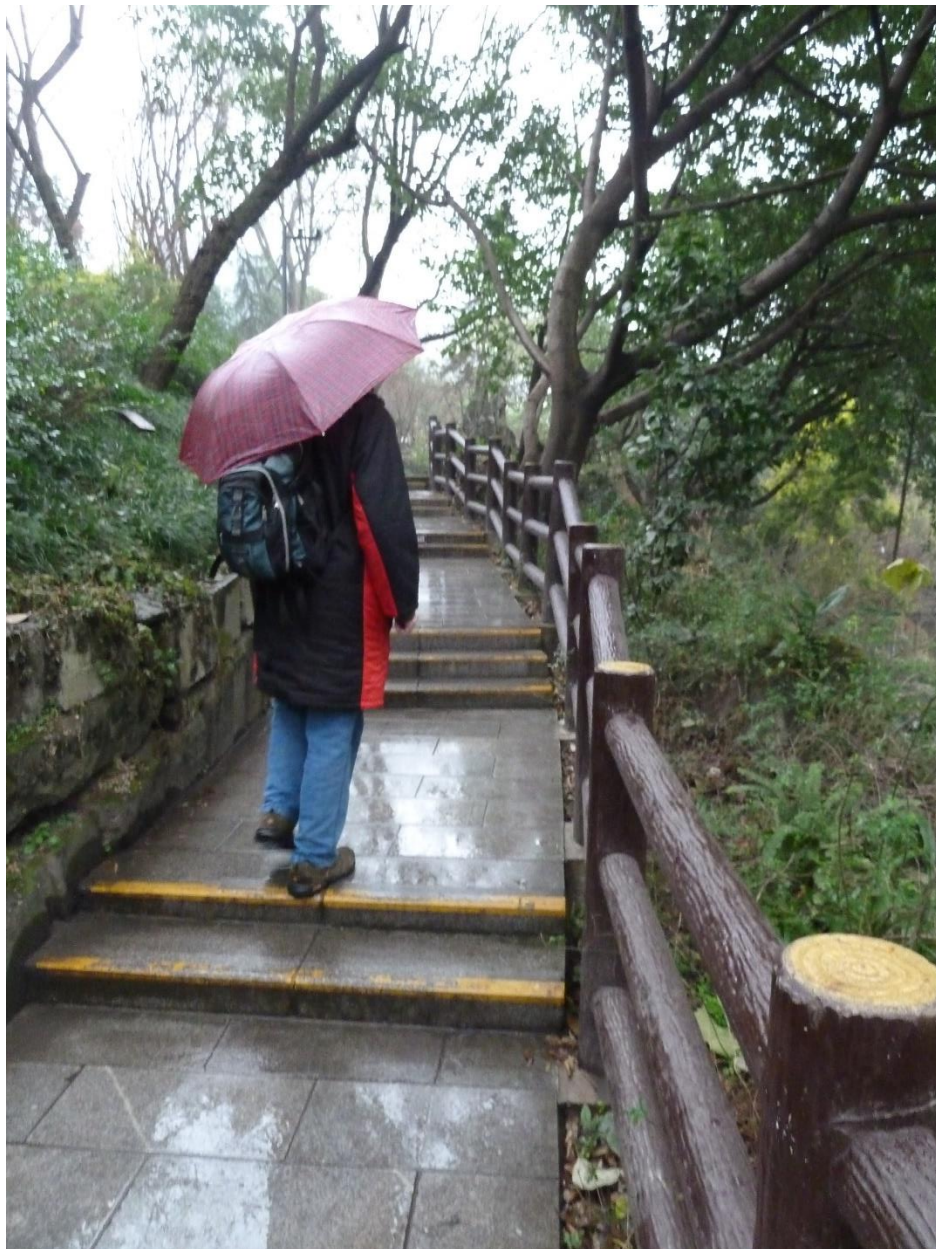
Animal cruelty is also ubiquitous. There were Christmas ornaments with live goldfish in them, for example. And here is animal cruelty to a fictional or at least extinct animal. The dragons are good: protectors and teachers. But that didn't stop these little stone people from lopping off the tail of the big stone dragon. I hope the dragon ate them all. And there's a lesson in here about people self-sabotaging, but it seems so obvious that specifying it further would be needlessly heavy-handed.





Chengdu Characters, 2018-2019: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

Back in the city, the precipitation continued, but in liquid instead of crystalline form.



A Chengdu intersection: my father and I were both impressed that the traffic patterns are understandable in Chengdu, and the visible traffic regulations are routinely followed. This was contrary to our experiences elsewhere in China and most of Asia that we have visited. When the lights were in our favor, it was actually safe to cross. Astonishing.





Then we went to the Wolong Panda Center. The place in Chengdu is a panda nursery. The Wolong place is a panda college, where the pandas are trained to return to the wild, which, in this case, is a nature reserve in the immediate vicinity of the panda college. The pandas who are in training are not in contact with the public at all, but there are a lot of other pandas who are used for breeding. So far, eleven pandas have graduated, and nine of them were released. Seven of them are still alive.



Chengdu Characters, 2018-2019: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

We arrived in time for panda breakfast, and listening to panda molars crushing bamboo.





In 2008, there was a massive earthquake along the Longmenshan Fault: 8.0 on the Richter scale. It was felt over a thousand miles (1600km) away. There were vertical displacements of up to 30 feet (about 9 meters). It caused over 200,000 landslides and over 800 quake lakes, which occur when flowing water is dammed by moving ground. Over 69,000 people died, and over 374,000 were injured. This school in Yingxiu has become a globally famous symbol of the upheaval.



There's a museum that informs visitors mostly of how representatives of the Chinese Communist Party rushed to rebuild the area and how the entire country rallied around the representatives of the Chinese Communist Party. There's a new school that was built across the road from the crumpled school: would you send your children to that school? I would have preferred a museum mostly about the earthquake. The representatives of the Chinese Communist Party have also taken the opportunity to cover a lot of ground with concrete and with concrete monuments to Chinese Communism, mostly obscuring the view of the school. In the museum and on the concrete outside, slow-march funeral music is on a loop, so that people can tear up on cue, and they do. I would have preferred a perimeter around the school so that we could walk around and have a look at the leftovers of the actual devastation, which is a much better memorial to the people and events than is a bunch of hideous concrete propaganda and manipulative musical cues. And have I mentioned the Chinese Communist Party lately? Chinese Communist Party. Whatever it is, it is all about the Chinese Communist Party.

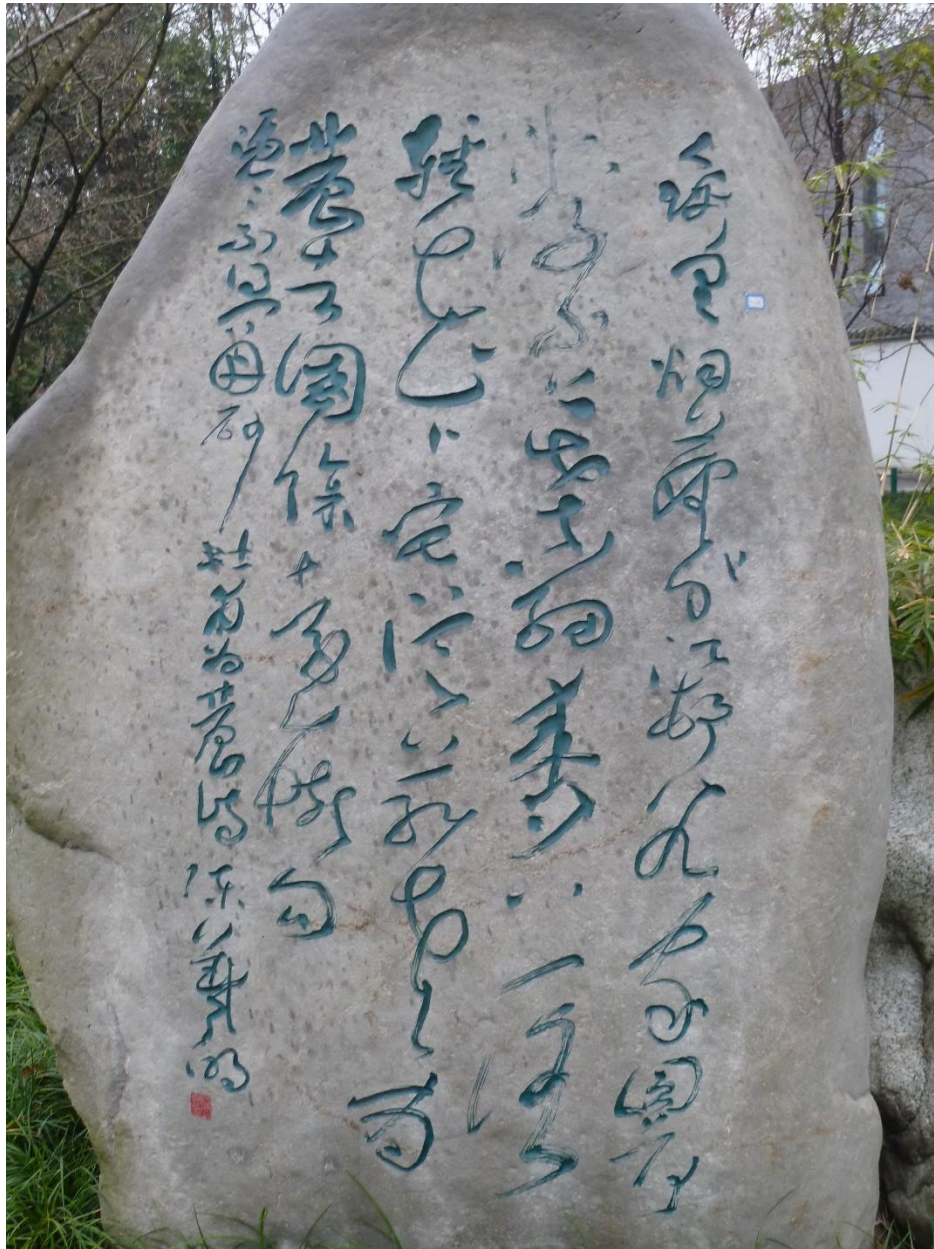




My father and I were both upset at the state of the earthquake site. It could have been both informative and meaningful, but, no. Chinese Communist Party. We complained to our guide. The poor guy: he's not getting paid enough to defend the Chinese Communist Party's coopting of a tragedy for its own purposes. Yet we can't be too judgmental. The post-9/11 propaganda and legislation and war are at least as bad, and in response to fewer fatalities, and we're all familiar with self-aggrandizement from the thugs in charge. We could, however, go to another location on another day, Huanhuaxi public park, devoted to Du Fu, a famous poet of the Tang dynasty. Here is his cottage, now used as a shed for the gardening tools needed to maintain the park. Also, his motorboat. And his banana trees. And his concrete posts under his cottage. I'm not sure he'd recognize the place.



Du Fu had withdrawn to the area of the park because he was in some political difficulty with the thugs at the top of the Tang imperial hierarchy. He used his time there to write poetry. The Tangs are long gone, but the poetry is not, and there are enormous stones around the park that have his poems carved in a variety of calligraphic styles. This is a proper memorial to someone: Du Fu's work still speaks for him.





A bridge in the park: one must include the stereotypical pictures. But more interestingly, on the way to the park, we walked along a street in Chengdu that had store after store of art supplies. I had wanted to buy real Chinese ink brushes on a previous excursion to China and had been thwarted by an enthusiastic but ignorant person who pointed out to me that I could get dozens of such brushes in a plastic bag at the Beijing equivalent of the dollar store. I want real brushes, and real brushes, that last for a really long time, cost real money. One does not acquire such brushes anywhere in the world by the dozen, in a plastic bag, for the smallest unit of currency. In any case, I now have a couple of beautiful, real ink brushes, and rice paper to go with them. I'm enjoying them immensely.



Birds in the park. I like the toes on the fluffy white one. I might like the toes on the duck-like bird, but I can't see them. Also in the park, I saw some small, bright yellow birds who were about the right physique for song birds. I need to keep looking for a decent field guide for Chinese plants, animals, and fungi. There wasn't a street for books on naturalism.





Somewhere along in here, probably while we were waiting for the washing machine to cycle through, my father mentioned a trip he had taken to an area near Chengdu where there were monkeys on the mountain. Aggressive, obnoxious, numerous monkeys. More animals? Why are we looking at calligraphy on rocks and stereotypical bridges and manipulative concrete? So we arranged an excursion to a nearby town, Emeishan, next to Emeishan, the mountain. I'll go with Mt. Emei for clarity. And we went by high-speed train to Emeishan. It took about 1.5 hours, and we zoomed along at up to 244 km/hour (152 mph) past truly rural portions of China where we could see subsistence farmers still subsistence farming.



We stayed at the Mt. Emei Teddy Bear Hostel. It had teddy bears in every room, and bear-themed murals, such as this one, in which a knock-off corporate bear is using a stick to beat back monkeys, while the monkeys cry and run and throw tantrums. Is it possible to make animal cruelty cute? The muralist gave it a solid effort.





Chengdu Characters, 2018-2019: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

Mt. Emei is one of the four sacred mountains of Buddhism in China, and it is large enough to have a variety of climates, including mixed bamboo forests. Bamboo is interesting: a grass that's as big as trees.





We walked all around on the afternoon we arrived, because it only took 1.5 hours to get there on the fast train. Here several trees had overgrown a wall, and there were birds running in and out among the branches and maybe roots and moss and twigs. I don't know the kind of these birds, either, but they could run on a mostly vertical area the way other people run around on horizontal areas. There were many of these birds, but this was the only one who showed up in a clear picture.





Chengdu Characters, 2018-2019: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

The sacred mountain has many sacred sites on it. This bronze lion was part of a temple courtyard.



Chengdu Characters, 2018-2019: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

We walked along a creek until we came to a waterfall and a small shrine.





We were up early the next day because the hostel lacks central heating, and it was winter. We went up out of town on a bus and quickly came to ice. Everything was covered in ice. We rented crampons. I think we bought crampons, but we had no need of them after the day on the mountain, and only for part of the day on the mountain, and they were not spectacular crampons, and we thought that if we were keeping the crampons we would like better crampons, so we returned the crampons on the way down the mountain. The crampons were odd, and I wasn't sure how to install them, so I flopped down on the ground and gave a foot to the guy who'd sold-rented the crampons to me, and he did it for me. Apparently, this is not the usual procedure, but everyone was entertained, including the guy who ended up installing the crampons on me for me.





The ice comes from constant mist at certain altitudes, like the mist in the background behind the monkey, a Tibetan macaque (*Macaca thibetana*). This was the only one I saw, and then he scampered down behind the fence and down the cliff. I didn't see him long enough to take a picture. My father said he saw several others, but I missed them. Not aggressive, not obnoxious, and not numerous.

Photo credit: David Perkins





The people on the mountain were aggressive, obnoxious, and numerous. In China, pushing others out of one's way is a culturally acceptable way to demonstrate one's superiority to others. Dad is onto this and coached me to make a 'v' with him shoulder to shoulder to defend our place while dealing with a ticket person one place. We're bigger, so we usually do what we do, but on the way down the mountain, a woman was charging through the crowd, and I saw her coming, so I planted myself. My burly buddy James says that he can't pick me up if I don't want to be picked up, and he walked into the visitor center at the Meteor Crater in Arizona and picked up the meteorite fragment that weighed over 700 pounds (317.5 kg), so I don't entirely believe him, but I do know that I can plant myself. So I did. She crashed into me. She bounced off, and ploughed forward again and crashed into me. This is an unusual result of a sidewalk experiment, so I just stood there. She crashed into me yet again. Then she looked at me. I looked at her. She rolled her eyes. I remained planted. She went around. Exactly, and I didn't thank her in any language. So I was glad to be up high enough to be off the trail and out of the ice (no mist above a certain altitude) and have a good view of the foothills of the Himalayas. Those high peaks in the far distance are not the high peaks. I need to visit the high peaks.



Chengdu Characters, 2018-2019: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

Mt. Emei is 10,167 feet high (3099 m), the highest of the four sacred mountains, and the higher up one goes, the farther down the fog is, and the more smoke from incense there is.





At the top of the mountain is this surprisingly ugly statue of elephants and Buddha heads. Surprisingly ugly because so much of Chinese art in a variety of eras has been globally recognized as beautiful. It's not often that one region's aesthetic sense translates well to other places' aesthetic senses, but a lot of Chinese art has achieved that. Then there's this statue. It's huge. It's gaudy. It has a lot of heads. I've been told that the many heads are supposed to represent the all-seeingness of the Buddha, a physical metaphor for omniscience, but I'm not sure that the Buddha can see all or know all. Or which Buddha this is. There are twenty-nine named Buddhas, including a future one to come, so I'm thinking that these might be a selection of Buddhas, with no care taken to make them individuals.



I love the roof animals in China. They used to be limited to imperial use, but now they can be put on any roof for the fun of it, and they are fun. The number of beasts, real and/or mythological, used to indicate the importance of the duties performed by the person who worked or lived in the building that had the creatures. Traditionally, an odd number of crouching beasts, maximum of nine, just beyond perfection, with a dragon or bull at the back of the line, with the direction of the line determined by the way the animals would go if they got up and went without turning around or going backwards.





In the front of the line, at the edge of the roof, is a guy riding a chicken. It's supposed to be a phoenix, but I'm pretty sure this one is a chicken. Each animal has a meaning or significance of some kind. The dragon, despite being a good guy, represents imperial power. A fish controls weather. A bull drives off evil. A sea horse is for future good luck. A chiwen is a hornless dragon, offspring of the dragon, or an owl, and consumes evil and protects against fire and flood. The guy on the chicken-phoenix is open to a number of interpretations: someone who was a servant who got uppity and then got hanged, a servant who is being watched by the other beings, or a deity who is riding a mythical beast off into the sunset. And there are other animals and options. I love the roof animals.



It was a long day on the mountain, and nature calls, regardless of travel plans. So we went looking and were alarmed by this sign. Where could the toilet possibly be going, pun intended? We followed the arrows and eventually caught up with the toilet.





Another of my favorite experiences in China is seeing that their stereotypical paintings are almost photorealistic. Those twisty trees that branch almost horizontally and have tight clusters of leaves do exist. Ridged mountains with a frosting of snow do exist. If only there were dragons flying in the skies, we'd have the whole experience. Maybe next time.

