

Introduction

“**The Jing**” is a new series of short stories (or maybe “novella” if I’m feeling snooty enough), inspired by the characters and events of my book:

Spectrum: The Joy, Stress, Love and Goodbyes of Expats in Beijing

As with the book it was inspired by, I hope that this series will give people an insight into expat life in Beijing, as well as life in China in general. It could be that all you know about life in China is based on various news reports talking about politics, military or economic affairs. The truth is there’s just so much more to China that makes it worthy of our attention and even adoration. As many expats discover, you can love China without loving its politics.

This book series is available absolutely free of charge, and I’m hoping that people just read and enjoy. But there are more ways to keep up with “The Jing”:

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And if you like what you read, you can get the original ebook that inspired the series on Amazon for Kindle or the Kindle App. Just search my name and you can find it.

Enjoy the story, and please feel free to offer feedback to one of our online channels!

Part One: Thursday Dinner

Thursday just would never have been Thursday without Julia's special "Thursday Dinner." The invitation e-mail goes out on a Monday afternoon to all those expats who've signed up, when the depressing effects of the first day back at work after a mad weekend are starting to bite. Julia worked in the office of an international school, which meant very early starts indeed, far too early for civilized society. She was always suspicious of how perky her Chinese colleagues were at that time on a Monday, but then remembered that they were more sensible and saved their energy for daytime activities over the weekend rather than for all-night booze-ups in Sanlitun with the usual gang.

Julia was 39 years old now, and often wondered why she was still so enticed by spending the weekend like a college student, drinking until the early hours and getting a cab home in broad daylight and arriving back to

find her elderly Chinese neighbours up and about, doing their morning Tai Chi. Early morning Tai Chi was something she'd often wondered about trying to join in with, but the more she wondered, the more easily she came to the conclusion that five in the morning perhaps is just a little fearsome a time to be getting up, whatever the supposed health benefits.

By Thursday lunchtime, Julia had received her e-mail replies and was ready to book the table. She'd chosen a Chongqing hotpot restaurant, which she acknowledged was a strange choice for the time of year. Chinese style hotpot, or "huoguo" as it's known in China, is a very hearty form of eating that's usually something reserved for the colder winter months. Just imagine an Irish crofter's cottage kitchen, all toasty from the stew sitting on the range cooker all day long and filling the house with snugly and delicious warmth and smells. Hotpot is nearly the same atmosphere, but in a restaurant filled with hundreds of other people. In Julia's mind though, it was a good choice for the familiar faces who, as she knew, loved it, and for the new faces who want to see something really different. Moreover, she knew for sure that there'd be a free table for the eight or nine people she was expecting.

While Julia's Thursday dinners were open to all who wanted to attend, she did usually hope for at least a few new faces at each one, so that her friends all had the chance to do a little networking in China - the land that decided to "forget" about Facebook. Tonight was a good haul, with a total of two new faces to bring to the group. Sherry and Todd were both fellow Americans, and both quite new to China. Sherry had come to work as a

science teacher in Julia's international school, and Todd worked at the American embassy in their visa section. It had been a long summer of goodbye parties for Julia, and she was always happy to see new people arriving in the Jing.

New faces meant the expat life cycle would start over. The summer was typically a time many chose to take their leave, either to move on to new cities in China, to go back to their hometowns, or to move on to a whole new country altogether. The expat community in the Jing, as with other global expat communities, was a transient and temporary one. There were very few who truly made the city their permanent home.

Certain expats, like Julia, could always be relied upon to be remain in the Jing, and as they often joked, the day these veterans have their own leaving parties will be the same day Satan is dancing on ice. These were the career expats, like Andy, Paul and Mark - all replying with a big fat "yes" to Julia's hotpot invitation. There were others who were somewhere in the middle - the temporarily permanent expats, like Nigel and Marie, who every year since they'd been together had talked about the possibility of moving away, but had never made solid plans to do so yet. For Julia, Sherry was hard to place in a group, since school teachers often just suddenly decide to leave at the end of the school year, but sometimes end up staying on and on, like Andy's roommate, Carolina. Todd however was easy to place; he is a fixed-term expat, with a definite shelf life in the Jing that is determined by his place of work. Embassy shelf life is anywhere between 2 and 4 years, depending on what they do.

And so the working Thursday dragged on, and all the working expats of the Jing started to feel those pains of nearing the end of the day, and being close to the weekend, but knowing that they do have to come back in for one more day of work on Friday before the fun can begin. It had been quite a long one for Julia, with three separate tours of the school for prospective students and their doting parents, as well as her lunch break being shortened (and afternoon lengthened) by a ridiculous staff meeting where they discussed "putting words into action," the irony of which was not lost on her. The last half an hour was absolutely the worst part of the day. Julia constantly tried to busy herself with things, but when she looked back at the clock only a minute or two had passed.

Finally quitting time came and a jubilant Julia left the office to go home and get ready for the expat event of the week. Since most of the cast of tonight's show were regulars at the dinner, Julia knew exactly how it would all play out. Andy would definitely get there first, for two reasons. First, he's a stickler for time and always accidentally sets off too early, thus arriving before anyone else. Second, despite being gay, in many people's eyes he's the worst example of a gay man in history, and doesn't take any time to pick out nice clothes; doesn't fiddle with his hair; and definitely doesn't check himself in any mirrors before leaving the apartment. After Andy, Julia would arrive, closely followed by Nigel and Marie, who are annoyingly happy in their marriage and would no-doubt walk to the restaurant hand in hand. The newcomers would arrive next, after having a brief phone conversation with Julia so they could find the restaurant on Ghost Street (which is jam-packed with restaurants, and unless you read

Chinese, it's hard to distinguish between them). Bringing up the rear would be Paul and Mark who would arrive when the food was already served up and cooking away in the pot, and would follow their arrival with a bitter-sounding exchange of blame as to why they arrived late again.

Arriving home at about 5.40pm, Julia took enormous glee in changing into more casual attire. The lack of dress etiquette for Chinese restaurants and bars was something she, and many expats, found very useful when it came to getting ready to go out somewhere. If she didn't feel like getting glammed up, then she wouldn't ever have to ... unless she was attending an embassy ball or something, but then that's a night that everyone feels like getting glamorous for. After a refreshing shower, a change, and a quick 40-minute look on Facebook and Twitter via the VPN, she was ready to go.

The restaurant wasn't far from where Julia lived, so she went on foot. The horrendous summer heat of the Jing had lifted, and a pleasant September and more autumn-like weather had started to set in. Ghost Street was a busy road, especially in the evening when throngs of people from all over the city started arriving by taxi and pedicab, eager to find something delicious to eat. Walking down the street could sometimes feel like running the gauntlet, as there were usually an army of barkers there, shouting out at passers by to come in and try their specials:

"We have Beijing specials! We have Sichuan specials! Spicy, non-spicy we have it all! Come on in!"

Of course it was never really in English, unless they saw a white tourist and his family and then they start saying, "Hallo! Hallo! Come in please! Come in please! Okay!" Fortunately for Julia, her parents were born in Guangdong, so she does at least look Chinese. This meant she was bothered a little less by the barkers and the pushy street vendors. Many locals, though, did have considerable trouble grasping the concept that Julia was actually American. They would take one look and deny all the other evidence, "She's Chinese!" they'd say.

The neon signs and red lanterns of Ghost Street formed a bizarre tapestry of old and new; an interesting reflection of how China has been developing. They readily embrace new things like the colourful, brightly lit signs; a new mobile phone; a German car. But, on the flip side, they also stick with traditions like lanterns, and placing Buddha statues in their restaurants, offering them fruit in return for prosperity and success in their enterprise. Julia always found it so fascinating that China was like this, and especially in Beijing. It was probably one of the biggest pull factors that kept her there in the first place. It was the country that had said yes to American fast food, but had by no means surrendered to it.

As she approached the restaurant, sure enough, there was Andy, tapping his foot in apparent impatience as he clocked Julia's approach. She smiled knowingly, bracing herself for the imminent "insult" that Andy would no doubt launch at her.

"And what sort of time do you call this, woman? You're clearly 28 seconds late, and I have been waiting here now for ... five minutes and 28

seconds. It's no wonder I hate women. Too busy picking out your shoes, or putting your hair in curlers, or whatever it is women do when they're wasting everyone's time"

"Hello to you too, Andy. I'm sorry you were waiting, but why didn't you just go inside? The table is booked under 'Zhao' as usual"

"Go in? By myself? Aren't you the captain of the expat mafia, Julia? You know full well that no sane diner would go into a hotpot restaurant by themselves! It's not the done thing! Hotpot is a social gathering, you're supposed to arrive with your mates! We have a table for eight or nine booked don't we? I'm gonna look a right twat sat there by myself, people looking over at me going 'that foreigner over there looks a bit of a weirdo doesn't he?' Never gonna happen"

"Andy, you go to eat hotpot by yourself all the time at Xia Xia. Anyway, I thought you didn't care what people think of you. That's what you always say, at least."

"First, Xia Xia is not a typical hotpot restaurant, it's a businessy lunchy sort of place where you sit at the bar and have your own individual pot. It's the exception to the hotpot rule. And second, yes, maybe I draw the line at sitting alone in a big hotpot restaurant when it comes to not caring what people think of me."

"Amazing. You wouldn't draw the line at, say, wearing a hoodie and sweatpants to dinner in a nice restaurant?" retorted Julia.

"This is *China*, Julia, and you've been here almost as long as I have. We both know there's essentially no such thing as a dress code in this country. So tell me, expat queen of the Jing, who else is joining us tonight?"

"It's mostly the usual suspects, but also a new teacher from my school, Sherry, and Theresa's replacement at the US embassy, Todd. You met him at Theresa's leaving party ... but I'm not sure if you'll remember so clearly."

"Of course I bloody remember! God, I wasn't that drunk ... was I? Well I do remember the whole night in fact. I must have just been a little excited about something" replied Andy, trying to sound genuine but nervously realising that Julia was right, and that he had forgotten most of what happened. He silently hoped that Todd might reveal a few details of the night that might help him keep up his charade of knowing everything he did.

The two of them made their way inside and got to their table. As usual, there was a chorus shouting welcome, "Huanying Guanglin!" they would say at the top of their voices. It's something they're required to do when customers are arriving. The workers in the convenience stores do it too, most of the time. As Julia had predicted, Chongqing hotpot was indeed not the most popular thing on the Beijing menu that night. Only about half the tables were full, but as usual with Chinese restaurants in China, there was a good, jovial atmosphere ringing through the place, and there was an army of servers ready to get to work. The two sat down,

ordered some beers and perused the menus as they waited for the others to arrive.

The restaurant was fairly typical for establishments on Ghost Street, with the heavy wooden furniture and ornate traditional-looking Chinese decoration. The walls were adorned with scroll-style paintings of tigers, mountain tops and temples, and the army of servers were dressed in ancient silky Chinese finery; their young faces beaming a warm welcome to their international guests. It's a fairly typical feature of a Chinese restaurant for there to be nearly as many servers and other staff as there are diners, and all looking like they're fresh out of high school. The girls are often from the rural parts of China, sometimes from around Beijing and other times from as far afield as Sichuan or Hunan; their faces reddened and hands swollen by the effects of the elements as they've no doubt worked outside for much of their young lives. The boys often sport wispy teenager mustaches that look like a feeble caterpillar has crawled onto their upper lip and died. But, their youth and inexperience aside, the career expats like Julia and Andy were absolutely aware of their tough lives, and knew that it was likely they were here in Beijing making money to send home to their poor families and aging parents, and so the two of them always found it very hard to be abrupt, brusque or rude with them, as they often saw more wealthy locals and expats doing. As one of the young servers brought the beer, the man at the next table was barking orders at them, demanding to know why his bullfrog dish hadn't been brought yet.

"So rude!" Julia always said. Andy was often taken aback by the way

every time Julia said it, it was as if she was hearing it for the first time, whereas she had heard such abuse being hurled at servers many dozen times prior to this Thursday night.

"I suppose Monkey and Paul are running late ... as usual. Another domestic dispute or something; Paul forgetting to iron Monkey's socks or some other such nonsense," said Andy.

"Or the wine wasn't chilled to the right temperature

Julia started looking over Andy's shoulder and waved, to which Andy turned round to see Nigel and Marie walking in, hand in hand.

"Hey guys!" said Nigel cheerfully. "Good choice of restaurant Jules! I've passed this one several times but never been in!"

"Hand in hand? Must you heterosexuals always be publicly displaying your vulgar love for each other? It's bad enough you mix genders like you're throwing together some strange sexual salad, without reminding those of us who keep things pure and simple gender-wise that you are together," Andy remarked.

"Oh! Hello to you too, Andy. It's nice to see you on form ... and alone as usual," quipped Marie, prompting a knowing smile from Andy who knew he'd get as good as he gave. "I saw one of the hotpots over there and it looked like it was just *a//* chili!" said Marie looking a little nervous.

"You can handle spicy food, can't you?" asked Andy, looking a little

puzzled. "When we were roommates you used to pour Sriracha over absolutely everything."

"Well, it's not me I'm worried about," she replied, looking over at Nigel. Julia and Andy looked as though they were starting to get the message, but Nigel decided, in his usual style, to really hammer it home.

"I believe my lovely wife is worried that after eating this wonderfully spicy repast, I might be prone to a few gassy expulsions during the night."

"Gassy expulsions?" said Marie sounding a little annoyed, "we are talking about farts that border on chemical warfare in our apartment. If the UN smelt one of them, you'd be facing charges for crimes against humanity."

Nigel couldn't quite contain himself at that, and let out his biggest, loudest laugh, which turned a few heads in the restaurant.

"Wow, Nigel" said Andy. "You've somehow been so loud, that even customers in a Chinese restaurant in Beijing are turning heads to look. I do believe that's a world first!"

"Because what? You're as quiet as a church mouse, Andy?" retorted Julia. "Last year when you came to the 4th of July party, you sang the American anthem so loud in the street while waving *my* flag around, you had people looking out of windows thinking there was a US invasion on!"

"The *American* anthem? You're such a traitor, Andy. What kind of self-

respecting Englishman would be singing the American anthem and waving the star spangled handkerchief around?" asked Nigel.

"I wanted to join in the celebration of the colonial children leaving home and making it all on their own!" answered Andy, taking up his beer glass and downing all the contents. "Come on everyone, let's have a quick beer toast just the four of us before everyone else gets here."

With that, the four of them took up their beer glasses and topped them up to do a quick "here's to Thursday" cheers. To people unfamiliar with beer drinking in China, the idea of filling up a whole glass and downing it in one might seem a bit daunting, especially for a Thursday night where everyone has to get up early in the morning. Beer glasses in China though are usually somewhere between a shot glass and a whisky tumbler in size, and therefore downing a whole one is no worse than drinking about two or three fingers' worth out of a big bottle.

"I know I probably shouldn't start too early, but I just have a feeling that tonight is going to be one of those nights, where we all plan to have dinner and then go home, but we all end up in Sanlitun drinking cocktails until the wee hours of the morning" said Andy.

The whole group winced at the idea, and denied that such a thing was possible for any of them. Perhaps after getting a glass or two ahead of the others, Andy was already starting to feel the worry of an early morning the next day slipping away, as he allowed himself to slip into fun mode. Julia's phone suddenly started ringing and she answered to find it

was Sherry wandering somewhere on Ghost Street looking in vain for the right set of neon signs and lanterns to guide her into the restaurant. Julia got up and left the table to go and find her outside, leaving the others to catch up on their day.

"Good day teaching, Marie? How were the little shit bags today?"
asked Andy

"Aww, no! My students are so darling! It's only when they get to the higher grades that they become really horrible. At grades 3 and 4 they're so cute!"

"I used to hate teaching younger kids. I never know what to say to them. It's hard for me to know if they just shouldn't know about some stuff yet because they're young and haven't been taught it, or if they're just plain thick."

Nigel guffawed at the idea, mimicking what it might be like for Andy to be teaching kids that young. "What? You mean you're in grade 3 and don't even know what parliamentary democracy is? Or even the Pax Britannica? How ridiculous! You're all thick as pig shit!"

Andy continued the parody. "Exactly! 'Oh you children! What a grand pooling of ignorance we have here in the classroom!' I wouldn't even know where to start educating the little blighters."

Julia walked back in the restaurant leading both Sherry and Todd to the table.

"It was such good timing. Todd was just coming down the street from the opposite direction at the same time as Sherry!"

She then made all the introductions, as was done with new arrivals.

"Sherry and Todd, this is most of my Beijing inner circle. Here we have Andy from the UK, Marie from Michigan and her husband Nigel also from the UK. There are two more joining us soon too, but they're usually late."

Introductions were followed by pleasantries, which in China always included things like "how long have you been here?" and "how are you finding it so far?" The answers are normally that they're finding it really fascinating, but are having problems with pollution and traffic. Little do the new expats know that this pattern will essentially be repeated throughout their whole time in China, whether it ends up being just a couple of months, or a couple of decades.

"Yeah we can probably go ahead and just start ordering, even without Monkey and Paul. If we wait, they'll only start a little domestic row when they get here about what they want to order.

"Sorry, these two guys coming, they're a couple?" asked Todd

"No ... not exactly..." said Andy, not entirely sure how to continue with the rest of the explanation. Nigel jumped in and tried to explain.

"They're what we like to call 'heterosexual life partners'. They're not

gay, but they do everything together except sexual stuff, and whenever you hear either of them use the pronoun 'we', it's bound to mean the two of them, as opposed to an actual girlfriend or significant other."

"I ... see," said Todd, still rather confused as to the relationship between these two guys.

"Monkey just needs a load of simple things," said Andy. "So, four plates of meat and some potato slices should do him, I think. And let's get a plate of the Chinese radish as well, that's fantastic in hotpot."

"But Paul has more complex tastes, as we both know," Nigel added. "We'll probably need to order some chickens' feet, earwig bladders and mosquito sweat for him," he joked.

"Not exotic enough for him. Don't forget that he's frequented the penis restaurant on no less than three occasions in the past six months," said Julia

"No less than you've been there, eh Julia?" Andy asked.

"Julia and Paul both just love to put those penises in their mouths," Nigel jested.

Sherry had to interject at this point. "The *what* restaurant? Penis?" she said in disbelief. Todd's jaw had also dropped upon hearing about this place.

Julia explained to them, "Yeah, it's a restaurant that specialises in cooking dishes made with ... various penises. I guess it stems from the traditional Chinese belief that the part of the body you eat is good for the corresponding body part on you. Eating eyes is good for your eyes; eating liver is good for your liver. You get the idea."

"So, what you're saying is that the restaurant is full of men with erectile dysfunction? Or genital warts?" asked Todd, prompting Nigel to burst out in loud laughter.

"I know this might sound strange coming from me, but can we try and steer the pre-dinner conversation away from plates of penis? Thank you," said Andy.

"It's just one of the many interesting restaurants I've taken groups to. It's something *different*, and that's the point of these events. That Thursday was the penis restaurant, the Thursday before that was the North Korean restaurant, and the Thursday before that was the toilet restaurant. They're off the beaten track; they're unique!"

"Oh my word, there's a 'toilet' restaurant?" asked Sherry.

"Yeah, there's a toilet theme to it. You sit on a toilet instead of a chair, and you eat the food out of plastic poo-shaped dishes..."

As Julia answered, she could see that she was visibly losing the newcomers on the idea, and it did sound rather unappetizing when described in detail.

"...well it was just some novelty place we tried. I didn't really care for it to be honest. But at least I'm trying to take us to more interesting, new places."

"Fair enough, Jules" Nigel said. "It does make an interesting change I guess. Anyway, I'm absolutely ... fucking ... famished. Let's get this show on the road. Paul and Monkey will get here when they get here. We can always order more when they do. It all arrives at the table raw anyway, so we're not going to be sat around for ages waiting for it."

"Ah I just got a text from Paul. They're just leaving Wangjing now, so they'll probably be another 15 or 20 minutes," said Julia. "So they'll only be like 25 minutes late overall. It's not so bad for those two."

Julia and Andy proceeded to summon a waiter and make the order. In Paul's absence, Andy had the loudest holler, so it was down to him to get someone over. In fantastic Northern Chinese style, he let out the resounding "fu yuanr!" which prompted three servers to jump around and respond, one of which trotted over to see us. Sherry hadn't been in China long, and seemed a little embarrassed at Andy's action, but the others explained to her that that's just the way it's done in this part of China. The waiters don't come around and see you, so you have to summon them. They only wait on you when you give them an order to do so. As Marie put it:

"It was weird for me at first too. I was so inhibited by the way we do things in America. You have to work on letting that inhibition go, and just

shouting out the words. No one's gonna stare at you; no one's gonna think you're weird or rude. Just remember that it's the done thing over here."

Sherry heard what Marie said, but still found it hard to process. She wasn't sure she really had it in her. Then suddenly, at that moment, Todd let out a loud "fu yuanr!" of his own and the same waiter came running back. Nigel congratulated him on a fine summoning, but then of course Andy had to explain to the waiter that they didn't need anything; that they were "just testing." Todd and Sherry both marveled at Julia and Andy speaking Chinese to the waiters, telling them all the different things they wanted, and reading the all-Chinese menu.

"It's amazing you guys can speak the language" Todd said. "I tried to learn a little Chinese before coming out to my posting here, but just gave up. Too difficult!"

"I think it's a common misconception that Chinese is especially difficult. I think westerners find it hard at first because it's just so different. When you get over the differences, the language itself isn't that complicated. For instance, there's no verb conjugation ... at all! One verb is used in the same form in every sense of time," Andy explained.

"Yeah, it's not an *easy* language, but then again what language is?" added Julia. "Learning Chinese will really enhance your time here though. You'll find you might need for quite a few everyday situations in the Jing, or if you want to travel and you're somewhere not many people speak any

English beyond 'hello' and 'OK'"

"Well, we get Chinese classes at the embassy, so I'll definitely be signing up. I heard though that you can get by quite well in Beijing without too much Chinese," Todd said.

"That's for sure" said Marie. "You just need a little survival stuff; how to direct a taxi driver; how to order in a restaurant; buying fruit and veg at the market. Stuff like that is totally fine."

Both Todd and Sherry were very keen to learn as much as they could about life in China, and as fast as they could too. They continued asking their questions, which were always deftly answered by the four veteran expats at the table. Each seemed to have their own little area of expertise. The conversation was suddenly interrupted by a waiter bringing a large pot to the table and placing it on the gas burner built in to the table's centre. The pot had two kinds of soup inside, which intrigued the newcomers. Julia gave a brief introduction to the concept of Chinese hotpot.

"So, this is our soup here which is gonna heat up on the burner for a while, and they'll now start bringing us the food we ordered, which is all raw."

Sure enough, more plates started to arrive. Soon enough it looked to Sherry and Todd as if it would never end, with so many plates that they couldn't all fit onto the table. There were some that had to be placed onto a separate cart to one side. Some carried meat; some carried tofu items;

some carried green vegetables, and others carried things that could only be described as ... mysterious. At least, to Sherry and Todd they were quite mysterious.

"What is that dark sliced stuff right there?" asked Sherry with a slight look of disgust on her face. "It looks like something that has been soaked in blood"

"Funny you should say that ... this stuff has a texture a bit like tofu, but it's made with ducks blood," answered Julia.

"So what exactly is in it? Andy, do you know?"

"Not exactly, but then again I'm one of those people who's happy to eat this type of delicious food, but has no idea exactly how it works. As far as I know, it's simply coagulated ducks' blood that is heated with water and salt to solidify into that state."

Suddenly the chickens' feet arrived, which prompted Sherry to put her hand up to her mouth as if she was going to be sick. Todd just laughed when he saw them.

"Oh my god! Are those the chickens' feet? Man, they look gnarly! Is there even any meat on 'em?"

"Not as such," Nigel answered. "They are more something to kind of nibble on and gnaw until you garner whatever it is you want from them. I personally think they're disgusting and I'd sooner wolf down a plate of yak

shit than touch them.”

“Yeah, the first time I was given one of those, I bit right into it thinking it would be meaty, but ended up with this rubbery, chewy nonsense stuff in my mouth that I just hated!” Marie said.

“Oh, Marie, I had a similar experience the first time I had chicken neck. Chomped straight down into it, and got a mouth full of bony shards. Anyway Sherry, don’t worry because the chickens’ feet are really for Paul. They’re not even for the soup. This restaurant just prepares them as a kind of appetizer, and we happen to know that Paul loves them. No one else in the group likes them.” Andy added.

Julia continued her explanation of the dinner.

“So, this side of the pot is spicy soup, and the other half is plain soup, and what we do is first wait for it to boil, and then we start putting the raw food inside to cook.”

Leading by example, Nigel picked up a plate of radish and dumped half into each side of the pot, causing a little splash onto the table. Sherry rushed to dab it up, but was assured that it really didn’t matter. Marie put it quite simply for her, “Chinese food can get messy,” referring to the way that everything had to make its way from a plate, bowl or pot in the middle of the table to the diner’s plate via chopsticks, and so sometimes little bits dropped, or sauces drip and the table gets dirty. Satisfied with not having to clean up too much, everyone took up chopsticks and started

to load the pot. The meat always cooks quickly, and was soon ready to eat, which prompted Julia to give her final lesson in "Hotpot 101"

"Once the food is ready, we can scoop it out with these metal ladle things, or we can just lift with the chopsticks. Ladles are more hygienic of course, but who cares! Anyway, we take the cooked food and dip it in our sesame seed sauce before eating. The meat only takes a matter of seconds. You can even just hold onto the piece and dip it in and out until it looks done. See, now the pot is boiling, I can take this meat, dip in ... and out ... in ... and out ... in ... and out ... in ... and out, and there you have it. Now for the sauce."

Julia directed their attention to a small porcelain bowl that had been placed down just before the pot came.

"I wondered what this stuff was" Sherry said, dipping one of her chopsticks into the bowl, and then licking off the sauce. "Mmm! It's fantastic! It's sesame? It tastes more like peanut."

"Yeah it does a bit, but I assure you it's sesame." Andy replied.

Everyone started to tuck into the food, and soon the comments on the spice started.

"Oh, mama! That's a *spicy* hot soup! Wow!" said Nigel. "I've had the spicy soup at hotpot before, but *fuck* me that's ridiculous!"

"Well this is Chongqing hotpot, so of course it's going to be super

spicy!" Julia replied. She picked up the ladle and started pushing it around the spicy soup, revealing dozens upon dozens of whole chilies swimming around in there. "This is why using chopsticks is a bit better for this soup, because every time you dredge the soup for meat or veg, you're gonna get a ladle full of chilies every time."

Sherry had trouble with anything that had been in the hot soup, and her eyes even started watering as she had a piece of meat from it.

"It's ok if it's too much for you," Nigel said. "Stick to the plain soup pot, that's what I'm doing."

"Yeah but the difference, Nigel, is that you're doing it so that you don't accidentally gas your wife to death in bed later."

For Sherry, it wasn't just the spice that had her rattled, it was also the chopsticks. Todd seemed to be doing well enough, but he had a lot of experience using them in his student days when he practically lived on Asian take away food. Sherry, on the other hand, had never really used chopsticks, even when she'd eaten Asian food. She became a little self-conscious when she saw the dexterity of the others, breezing through their food with no trouble. The nerves got to her and she even started to sweat a little, but as it turns out, that was actually down to the heat from the pot.

"Wow, I'm sweating. Is it getting hot in here? Or am I just terrified?" asked Sherry.

"Yeah, I know it's kinda warm. This isn't the time of year people would normally come for hotpot. It's a real winter thing, but I was just worried about getting a table for this many people on short notice. I don't know why I worry about stuff like that, because you don't normally need to reserve tables in China."

Sherry struggled on, getting her food from the pot to her sesame sauce and then to her mouth while making as little mess as possible. She wondered if a meal could really be worth all this trouble, tasty or not. She set her chopsticks down for a minute, about to declare that she might be being defeated by it all, when suddenly Andy dropped a fish ball covered in sauce into his lap.

"Shit! Logistical disaster! Logistical disaster!" said Andy, prompting the others to laugh.

"Aww, do you need a bib and a spoon, Andy?" said Marie

"Silence, woman!" Andy snapped. "It's bad enough I get this stuff all over my best sweat pants without you bringing your lack of testosterone or a penis into the problem."

"Best sweat pants? Worst ... gay guy ... ever!" replied Marie.

Seeing the likes of China veteran Andy still having the odd issue with chopsticks gave Sherry a renewed confidence, and feeling refreshed, she soldiered on and found that it did get easier with practice. The group continued eating when Marie's phone suddenly rang.

"Oh, it's Monkey. They must be looking for the restaurant too, I'll go out and find them."

Marie left the group talking to Monkey on the phone, which only left Sherry to ask the obvious question.

"So ... who is Monkey? Surely his name isn't *actually* monkey, is it?"

"No, but we all call him Monkey" Andy answered.

"But why?"

Nigel offered an explanation. "Aside from being from the north of England, which automatically makes him a monkey in my book..."

"Oi! Watch it you southern faggot! Don't forget I'm from the north too!" said a humorously incensed Andy.

"...well, quite. Anyway as far as I know it stems from a nickname he got years and years ago back in the UK, and he's just stuck with it his whole life. In fact he seems to really embrace it, his flat has monkey toys dangling from things all over."

"So what's his real name?" asked Todd, amazed that no one had revealed it yet.

Julia answered "Oh, Monkey is Mark, I'm not sure if I mentioned the name before now. But yeah we do all call him Monkey."

"I feel weird calling him Monkey when I hardly know him. Will he mind if I just call him Mark?" Sherry asked.

The others laughed at her apparently genuine concern not to breach some kind of etiquette by using an overly familiar nickname.

"Honestly, it's fine. Just call him whatever you want," Julia said.

Marie returned to the table leading Paul and Monkey, who made their introductions to the new faces before greeting the familiar ones with their typical banter.

"Alright there, you big puff" said Monkey, "hello to you too Andy."

"Oh, I see what you did there Monkey, very funny!" Nigel answered.
"How are you doing, Paul?"

"Hi Nigel! I'm fine thanks. Sorry we're just a bit late again. Got a bit held up waiting for Monkey here to finish getting himself ready."

"Don't you fuckin' start blaming this on me! I was the one waiting around for you, you fuckin' bell end" replied Monkey in his brilliant faux anger that those unfamiliar might easily believe to be serious. "I was sitting in your living room having a nice glass of wine, waiting for you to finally pick what you were wearing and drag your girly arse out of your bedroom so that we could fuckin' go."

"Yeah, alright then Mark, if you say so. Sorry everyone, it definitely

was *my* fault then, since Mark says so, and seems so sure about it."

Sherry and Todd were awash with a strange combination of shock and confusion. They looked at each other briefly before losing themselves in their own thoughts. Are they a couple? Are they married? Are they happy together? Has something happened between them?

"I'm telling you guys, if I ever leave China, I'm going to miss your heterosexual life partner banter" said Andy. "You're worse than an old married couple. And before you start trying to deny it, may I draw everyone's attention to the mushroom incident at Paul's the last time we all got together there for action movie night," he added.

"Incident?" asked Monkey, with a genuine sense of intrigue. "I merely pointed out that Paul had erroneously, and probably accidentally, allowed some mushrooms to slip into my portion of the vegetable curry."

Paul replied, "Actually, Mark, what you said to me was 'Paul...where on my fuckin' forehead does it say fungus eater? That's right! It doesn't! So please tell me, you dithering fuckwit, what in the name of bleating Beelzebub are mushrooms doing in my effing curry!?"

"Same fuckin' difference," said Monkey

"Anyway, enough! Hello, new people, I'm Paul. Nice to meet you. Yes, yes, nice to meet you both. Lovely. Have you been in Beijing long?"

"No, they're newbies" Julia answered. "Tonight is their first experience

of hotpot.”

“Are you sure Chongqing hotpot was the right way to go? It’s hotter than bloody hell!” Paul asked.

“We *did* get the yuanyang pot with the split soup,” said Julia, defending her choice.

“It’s not that bad. I mean, it’s spicy, but really tasty. It’s not like we’re having to put the whole chilies in our mouths or anything.” Todd said.

“And, I am absolutely inhaling this sesame seed sauce. It’s awesome!”

“Yeah, it’s a little spicy for me. I’m gonna have to stick to the clear soup when I have hotpot.” said Sherry a little nervously. Julia had noticed that she appeared to be struggling a bit with the food.

“Hotpot can be a bit of an acquired taste,” said Nigel. “I didn’t really like it the first couple of times I tried it, but by now it’s become one of my favourites.”

“Still, it’s a slightly odd choice for summer, Julia,” added Paul

“I know, I know, but really, I was afraid we wouldn’t get in anywhere else with so many of us. Have you not seen? The other restaurants on Ghost Street are all rammed and there’re dozens sitting outside waiting for tables.”

“Well, hotpot is never something I’ve particularly acquired a taste for,

but as long as there's plenty of meat on offer, I'm happy." said Monkey as he piled up slice after slice of lamb and beef onto his plate.

"Ever the carnivore, Mark" said Paul. "Heaven forbid you should actually have some vegetables in your life"

"What utter fuckin' bollocks, Paul. If you keep sneaking mushrooms into my curry, I'll never be short of vegetables, will I?" Monkey retorted.

"Anyway," interrupted Marie. "Sherry, Todd, we know you haven't been here so long, but tell us more about what brings you to China. Sherry, I know you're working at Julia's school, what are you teaching?"

"I'm a general science teacher, but I specialize in biology. I'm from Hawaii originally, and did teach there for a while, but I spent the last few years teaching in Missouri."

"How delightfully random," said Nigel. "What on earth possessed you to leave Polynesian paradise to go teach in some farm state?"

"I was actually in Kansas City, so not exactly hickville or whatever. I really liked it there."

"Have you ever been to Knob Lick Mountain? That's in Missouri," asked Andy, with a devious look in his eye.

"Andy! Stop it! That's just one of your gross pickup lines that you use in Destination," said Julia.

"Oh, I wish I were well-enough endowed to make such lines, but alas, no."

Nigel was once again falling about in fits of loud laughter. "I'm not sure if I'm laughing more at what Andy just said, or at the actual existence of a place called Knob Lick Mountain!"

"Grow up, you two" said Monkey. "You're like a pair of fuckin' kids."

"Oh, piss off Monkey! If you can't admit that you raised even a small titter inside at hearing there was a real place called Knob Lick Mountain, then you're just a fucking liar. I'm serious," Andy replied.

"You were saying, Sherry?" Paul said, bringing the conversation back.

"Oh, just that I liked Missouri a lot, but was excited to take up an opportunity overseas. I'd never been out of America until this trip."

"Well, it's a big country I suppose. When you've got a place as diverse as that, you don't really need to go out as such, do you?" said Paul.

"Yeah but I don't want people to see me as one of those Americans who's never been out into the world, and can't even locate a country like China on the map."

"You can find people like that right at this very table, only it's that they never leave Beijing, and just settle into their life here and never move. Eh, Andy?" said Julia, throwing Andy a disapproving look.

"What? When am I going to have time and money to leave Beijing? I don't get paid much, I'm still repaying my student loan, and I'm working all the time! When I've the time, the money isn't there, and when the money comes, there's no fucking time," replied Andy, pouring yet another beer into his glass.

"You say you don't have the money, but you also spend quite a lot of time in Sanlitun at the weekends. Thirty five kuai per glass adds up over a month!" Marie added.

"Oh my god, what the hell is this? Now you're all just ganging up on the queer kid! You homophobes!" Andy replied, but unable to keep a straight face as he said it. "I think this would be an excellent time to hand over to Todd to tell us more about what brings *him* here, don't you think everybody? Todd, over to you."

"Well, not so much to say I guess. I'm from DC, just turned 30 this year. I work for the US State Department. I was in the London embassy before this, and I worked a few years in Germany as well. Basically they sent me here so here I am! I was excited to get a posting in Asia, it's my first time over here. My first few days I hung out a lot with people at the embassy but honestly, most of them are a bit ... I don't even know what it is..."

"Unsociable?" asked Nigel

"Right, yeah! Like they just stick together, don't really get out into the

community and get to know different people. I mean, not everyone's like that, but it seems most are."

"We had our own experience of them and this behaviour," Julia started, "when we were having another hotpot dinner. We had two tables which were starting to get full, so they opened up a third table for us, and we'd asked if maybe each table would send a few people to the third one to even it out. Andy went over first, then a couple of others from his table. So there were just three on the third table, and when we turned to the first table which was mostly US embassy peeps, they all kinda looked away, some saying, 'we were here first, why should we move?' It was so embarrassing!"

"Yeah, in short, Todd, they were being a massive bunch of wankers."

Todd couldn't help but laugh at this frank lampooning of his colleagues at the embassy, perhaps because he could see what they were getting at. Both Todd and Sherry started to feel more relaxed in the company of fellow expats, who probably knew exactly what they were thinking and going through at this stage in their time in China. Todd may have been overseas before, but only in countries that were as developed as America or at least aligned with their culture and thinking.

China is an interesting adventure even for the seasoned expat. Just imagine being catapulted into a society and culture so alien to you, and so radically different from your own, that you don't even recognize the basic and fundamental elements of it. If you found yourself in that situation,

what would you give to have people around you who not only understand your predicament, but who can also help get rid of that feeling of being so alone? For many Western people, journeying to Asia is like putting oneself in a battle arena where one's senses are attacked, bombarded and riled to breaking point. The initial shock at there being *so* many people everywhere you go; the noises and smells of shouting people, cars, buses, trains and animals; the inability to understand the myriad of billboards, signs and posters, apart from the odd Arabic numeral or a term like "3G" or "happy" thrown in. The feelings of anxiety and stress can only really be alleviated when one finally finds themselves amongst others who've been through the same experience.

The dinner continued and the expat friends soon all became fully relaxed in each other's company, and they celebrated their new friendship with beer, after beer, after beer. It was then that Julia made a very dangerous suggestion indeed.

"Hey how about we make things a little more interesting with a bottle of baijiu?"

"Julia! That's crazy! It's a Thursday night" said Marie. "There's no way I'm gonna start having baijiu right now after this beer."

"Oh, come now woman" said Andy. "I thought it was Nigel's job to be the girly, scared gay one, and that you were the man in the relationship. Just have one little tiny shot with us and our new friends here."

"Sorry, what's baijiu?" asked Todd. Nigel jumped at the chance to explain.

"Put quite simply, it's very strong rice wine stuff that's a traditional favourite in China among the crazies who live here too long. In more real terms, it's the stuff that's going to turn this casual dinner with beer into a full-blown booze up with possible vomiting and blacking out."

"It's the stuff that makes a typical Thursday into a trashed Thursday," Paul added.

"It's the stuff that makes you fuckin' hung over as fuck is what it is. I'm not having any," said Monkey shaking his head.

"Come on Mark, don't be such a grumpy chimp! Join us for one."

"I'm not a grumpy chimp, *you're* just a fuckin' alcoholic gimp."

"Gimpy and Chimpy - that could be the new name for the two of you!"

And with that Paul did his loudest, slightly drunk "fu yuan!" to divert attention from the cutting new nickname Nigel had christened them with, that positively shook the foundations of the restaurant. He used his best Chinese to order a small bottle of baijiu, which the server quickly brought back from the reception counter, along with several clean glasses. The bottle was passed around for the new faces to take a look. It was a fairly small green bottle with a blue and red label marked with Chinese

characters. Andy explained that this particular kind of baijiu was a Beijing brand called "Erguotou." The whole group seemed to cringe and start to shudder at the very mentioning of that name ... Erguotou. It seemed like some kind of curse in a backward village in Romania where the villagers had been terrorized by a demon that no one could speak the name of...

"The Erguotou beast of Beijing!" It sends the townspeople screaming and running for the hills every time.

Paul opened up the bottle and started dividing it up among the glasses, just a little in each one. The smell of it took Sherry and Todd a little off guard as they lifted their glasses closer to their nose for a sniff.

"Oh ... my god, that's strong-smelling stuff" Todd said.

"Is it gonna kill me if I drink it?" said Sherry, with an extremely troubled look on her face. "I'm not much of a drinker, I have to say."

"You'll be fine, dear," said Andy picking up his glass with a bizarre mixture of fake confidence and sheer terror scattered across his face. "Shall we have a toast then?"

"Oh, here we go. Andy's getting on his soapbox again. Alright Andy, let's hear it," said Marie, rolling her eyes."

"I'm not always trying to get on my 'soapbox', how ridiculous! I'm just trying to make a nice toast."

"You fuckin' do always get up on your damned soapbox! Remember at Nigel's party when you were drunk ... well ... as drunk as the rest of us ... and you stood up, silenced everyone and listed the five men you'd most like to fuckin' marry or something?" said Monkey.

The group laughed in reminiscence, as Andy was forced to accept defeat.

"No, no it's okay mate, I'm just kidding. Go on then, let's hear it."

"Well, okay, but I'll keep it very simple and heterosexual..."

"Like the way you dress?" joked Todd.

The group howled in amusement at Todd's speed at catching on to the group banter. Nigel started to applaud, as Andy, also in quiet awe of Todd's good observation, continued the toast.

"It's always good to see new faces in the Jing, and on behalf of our little expat cabal, I congratulate you on being able to be friends with us, and welcome you to the city of Beijing. Here's to fun and happy times in the Jing! And to new friends!"

"Cheers!" everyone replied.

There was a moment of silence as each of the friends downed their glass of baijiu in one. The silence was then immediately broken with the audible wincing and even a little choking from Sherry who looked like she

was about to throw hers right back up again. Julia had reddened slightly after drinking the beers, but after drinking the baijiu, her Asian face redness came right out.

"Oh, wow, that's brutal," said Nigel. "Fuck me I'm gonna regret that later on. And look at Julia's face! She's getting Asian red face reaction. Classic."

Julia's face had reddened in the cheeks and around the eyes to the point she looked rather inebriated, and combined with the embarrassment of everyone looking at her and chortling at her redness, she also started to blush, which of course didn't do her any favours.

"It's not *that* funny, you guys. Sometimes it means people think I'm drunker than I really am. It's a little better now I'm older, but when I was in my 20s, I could have just a couple of sips of beer and I would go totally red. I got stopped by the police twice while driving home and they had to breathalyze me so I could prove I wasn't drunk."

Sherry started to shudder like she was going to vomit as the taste of the baijiu started to work its way back up through her. She put one hand over her mouth, and took up her chopsticks in the other to get the taste of some food into her mouth. If there ever was a drive to push her to improve her chopstick skills, then the urgency of removing the taste of Erguotou was it.

"It has quite a distinct taste," she said. "I'm not sure I'll be having

much more of that any time soon.”

Andy took up his empty glass and held it up as if it were a skull from a production of “Hamlet” and started to talk about baijiu.

“When most people drink it, they tend to agree that it has a more pleasing initial taste than something like cheap vodka or nasty blended scotch. It goes down great at first, but quite soon the strength of it starts to hit you...”

Nigel, Marie and Paul started nodding, knowing exactly what Andy was going to say next.

“...the *burning*. The road of fire is laid in thine throat and you are forced to endure the inferno’s grip as it pulls you ever closer to the pit of drunken shame.”

Monkey attempted to simplify by simply throwing in “He means that it’s fuckin’ lethal stuff, and that it fucks you up.”

“Yeah I think we all got that” said Todd laughing.

As the dust settled from the explosion set off by the baijiu drinking, the conversation in the group became increasingly lively. The vicious local spirit had done its job, and now everyone was getting into the celebrations. The last bits of food were polished off, and the bill was collected and split. In the minds of Sherry and Todd, that perhaps should have been the sign of the winding down of the whole evening. Little did

they know ... that's not how it was done in the Jing.

"Right, come on guys, let's go into Sanlitun and have a quick drink at First Floor before going home." Andy suggested

Audible protests came from most of the group once again, with only Paul and Monkey approving of the idea.

"Come on, you fuckin' puffs, let's go and have just *one* drink. It's not *that* late yet. We're not going to be out all night getting smashed. It's Thursday, let's have a brief, pre-weekend drink for fuck's sake," said Monkey.

Everyone was convinced easily enough and set off out of the restaurant to head into Sanlitun. Thursday night had only just begun. Because after all, in the Jing...

...the unplanned, full-blown night out is the done thing on a Thursday.