

Europe on fifteen hundred yuan a day.

by Evan Osnos *The New Yorker* APRIL 18, 2011

For several millennia, ordinary people in China were discouraged from venturing beyond the Middle Kingdom, but before the recent New Year's holiday—the Year of the Rabbit began on February 3rd—local newspapers were dense with international travel ads. It felt as if everyone was getting away, and I decided to join them. When the Chinese travel industry polls the public on its dream destinations, no place ranks higher than Europe. China's travel agents compete by carving out tours that conform less to Western notions of a grand tour than to the likes and dislikes of their customers. I scanned some deals online: “Big Plazas, Big Windmills, Big Gorges” was a four-day bus tour that emphasized photogenic countryside in the Netherlands and Luxembourg; “Visit the New and Yearn for the Past in Eastern Europe” had a certain Cold War charm, but I wasn't sure I needed that in February.

I chose the “Classic European,” a popular bus tour that would traverse five countries in ten days. Payment was due up front. Airfare, hotels, meals, insurance, and assorted charges came to the equivalent in yuan of about twenty-two hundred dollars. In addition, every Chinese member of the tour was required to put up a bond amounting to seventy-six hundred dollars—more than two years' salary for the average worker—to prevent anyone from disappearing before the flight home. I was the thirty-eighth and final member of the group. We would depart the next morning at dawn.

I was told to proceed to Door No. 25 of Terminal 2 at Shanghai's Pudong International Airport, where I found a slim forty-three-year-old man in a gray tweed overcoat and rectangular glasses. He had floppy, parted hair, and introduced himself as Li Xingshun, our guide. To identify us in crowds, each of us received a canary-yellow lapel badge bearing a cartoon dragon with smoke curling from its nostrils, striding in hiking boots above our motto: “The Dragon Soars for Ten Thousand Li.” (A *li* is about a third of a mile.)

We settled into coach on an Air China non-stop flight to Frankfurt, and I opened a Chinese packet of “Outbound Group Advice,” which we'd been urged to read carefully. The specificity of the instructions suggested a history of unpleasant surprises: “Don't travel with knockoffs of European goods, because customs inspectors will seize them and penalize you.” There was an intense focus on staying safe in Europe. “You will see

Gypsies begging beside the road, but do not give them any money. If they crowd around and ask to see your purse, yell for the guide.” Conversing with strangers was discouraged. “If someone asks you to help take a photo of him, watch out: this is a prime opportunity for thieves.” I’d been in and out of Europe over the years, but the instructions put it in a new light, and I was oddly reassured to be travelling with three dozen others and a guide. The notes concluded with a piece of Confucius-style advice that framed our trip as a test of character: “He who can bear hardship should carry on.”

We landed in Frankfurt in heavy fog and gathered in the terminal for the first time as a full group. We ranged in age from six-year-old Lü Keyi to his seventy-year-old grandfather, Liu Gongsheng, a retired mining engineer, who was escorting his wife, Huang Xueqing, in her wheelchair. Just about everyone belonged to the sector of Chinese society—numbering between a hundred and fifty million and two hundred million people—that qualifies as the country’s middle class: a high-school science teacher, an interior decorator, a real-estate executive, a set designer for a television station, a gaggle of students. There was nothing of the countryside about my companions—the rare glimpse of a horse grazing in a French pasture the next day sent everyone scrambling for cameras—and yet they had only begun to be at home in the world. With few exceptions, this was everybody’s first trip out of Asia.

Li introduced me, the lone non-Chinese member of the group, and everyone offered a hearty welcome. Ten-year-old Liu Yifeng, who had a bowl cut and wore a black sweatshirt covered in white stars, smiled up at me and asked, “Do all foreigners have noses that big?”

We boarded a gold-colored coach, which shuddered to life. I took a window seat and was joined by a sturdy eighteen-year-old in a black puffy vest and wire-frame glasses. He had long, dark bangs and a suggestion of whiskers on his upper lip. He introduced himself as Xu Nuo; in Chinese, the name means “promise,” which he liked to use as an English name. Promise was a freshman at Shanghai Normal University, where he studied economics and shared two sets of bunk beds with three roommates. His parents were seated across the aisle. I asked him why his family had chosen to travel rather than visit relatives over the holiday. “That’s the tradition, but Chinese people are getting wealthier,” he said. “Besides, we’re too busy to travel the rest of the year.” We spoke in

Chinese, but when he was surprised he'd say, "Oh, my Lady Gaga!" an English expression he'd picked up at school.

In the front row of the bus, Li stood facing the group with a microphone in hand, a posture he would retain for most of our waking hours in the days ahead. In the life of a Chinese tourist, guides play an especially prominent role—translator, raconteur, and field marshal—and Li projected a calm, seasoned air. He often referred to himself in the third person—Guide Li—and he prided himself on efficiency. "Everyone, our watches should be synchronized," he said. "It is now 7:16 P.M." He implored us to be five minutes early for every departure. "We flew all the way here," he said. "Let's make the most of it."

He outlined the plan: we would be spending many hours on the bus, during which he would deliver lectures on history and culture, so as not to waste precious minutes at the sights, when we could be taking photographs. He informed us that French scientists had determined that the optimal length of a tour guide's lecture is seventy-five minutes. "Before Guide Li was aware of that, the longest speech I ever gave on a bus was four hours," he added.

Li urged us to soak our feet in hot water before bed, to fight jet lag, and to eat extra fruit, which might balance the European infusion of bread and cheese into our diets. Since it was the New Year's holiday, there would be many other Chinese visitors, and we must be vigilant not to board the wrong bus at rest stops. He introduced our driver, Petr Pícha, a phlegmatic former trucker and hockey player from the Czech Republic, who waved wearily to us from the well of the driver's seat. ("For six or seven years, I drove Japanese tourists all the time," he told me later. "Now it's all Chinese.") Li had something else to say about the schedule: "In China, we think of bus drivers as superhumans who can work twenty-four hours straight, no matter how late we want them to drive. But in Europe, unless there's weather or traffic, they're only allowed to drive for twelve hours!"

He explained that every driver carries a card that must be inserted into a slot in the dashboard; too many hours and the driver could be punished. "We might think you could just make a fake card or manipulate the records—no big deal," Li said. "But, if you get caught, the fine starts at eighty-eight hundred euros, and they take away your license! That's the way Europe is. On the surface, it appears to rely on everyone's self-discipline, but behind it all there are strict laws."

We were approaching the hotel—a Best Western in Luxembourg—but first Li briefed us on breakfast. A typical Chinese breakfast consists of a rich bowl of congee (a rice porridge), a deep-fried cruller, and, perhaps, a basket of pork buns. In Europe, he warned, tactfully, “Throughout our trip, breakfast will rarely be more than bread, cold ham, milk, and coffee.” The bus was silent for a moment.

We never saw Luxembourg in the daylight. We were out of the Best Western by dawn and were soon back on the Autobahn. Li asked us to make sure we hadn’t left anything behind, because some of his older travellers used to have a habit of hiding cash in the toilet tank or the ventilation ducts. “The worst case I’ve had was a guest who sewed money into the hem of the curtains,” he said. We headed for our first stop: the modest German city of Trier. Though it’s not quite a household name for most first-time visitors to Europe, Trier has been unusually popular with Chinese tourists ever since Communist Party delegations began arriving, decades ago, to see the birthplace of Karl Marx. My Chinese guidebook, written by a retired diplomat, said it once was described as the Mecca of the Chinese people.

We got off the bus onto a tidy side street lined with peaked-roofed, pastel-colored buildings. The cobblestones were silvery with rain, and Li donned a forest-green felt outback hat and pointed us ahead as he started at a brisk walk. We reached No. 10 Brückenstrasse, a handsome three-story white house with green shutters. “This is where Marx lived. Now it’s a museum,” Li said. We tried the door, but it was locked. Things were slow in the winter, and the museum wouldn’t be open for another hour and a half, so we’d be experiencing Marx’s house only from the outside. (“The sooner we finish here, the sooner we get to Paris,” Li had said.) Beside the front door was a plaque with Marx’s leonine head in profile. The building next door was a fast-food restaurant called Dolce Vita.

Li urged us to stay as long as we wanted, but he also suggested a stop at the supermarket on the corner to buy fruit for the ride ahead. We milled around awkwardly in front of Marx’s house, snapping photographs and dodging cars, until one of the kids pleaded, “I want to go to the supermarket,” and tugged his mother toward the bright storefront. I stood beside Wang Zhenyu, a tall man in his fifties, and we looked up at Marx’s head. “Not many people in America know about him, right?” Wang asked.

“More than you might think,” I said, and added that I’d expected to see more Chinese visitors. Wang laughed. “Young people no longer know anything about all that,” he said. Wang was thin and angular, with the bearing of a self-made man. He had grown up in the eastern commercial city of Wuxi and had been assigned the job of carpenter, until economic reforms took hold and he went into business for himself. He now ran a small clothing factory that specialized in the production of wash-and-wear men’s trousers. He didn’t speak English, but he’d wanted a catchy, international name for his company, so he’d called it Ge-rui-te, a made-up word formed by the Chinese characters that he thought sounded most like the English word “great.”

Wang was an enthusiastic tourist. “I used to be so busy that now I want to travel,” he said. “I always had to buy land, build factories, fix up my house. But now my daughter’s grown and working. I only need to save up for the dowry, which is manageable.” I asked why he and his wife had chosen Europe. “Our thinking is, Go to the farthest places first, while we still have the energy,” he said. Wang and I were among the last to arrive at the supermarket. Our group had stayed at the Chinese Mecca for eleven minutes.

Until recently, Chinese people had abundant reasons not to roam for pleasure. Travelling in ancient China was arduous. As a proverb put it, “You can be comfortable at home for a thousand days, or step out the door and run right into trouble.” Confucius threw guilt into the mix: “While your parents are alive, it is better not to travel far away.” Nevertheless, ancient Buddhist monks visited India, and Zheng He, a fifteenth-century eunuch, famously sailed the emperor’s fleet as far as Africa, to “set eyes on barbarian regions.”

Over the centuries, Chinese migrants settled around the world, but Mao considered tourism anti-Socialist, so it wasn’t until 1978, after his death, that most Chinese gained approval to go abroad for anything other than work or study. First, they were permitted to visit relatives in Hong Kong, and, later, to tour Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia. In 1997, the government cleared the way for travellers to venture to other countries in a “planned, organized, and controlled manner.” (China doles out approvals with an eye to geopolitics. Vanuatu became an approved destination in 2005, after it agreed not to give diplomatic recognition to Taiwan.) Eighty per cent of first-time Chinese travellers went in groups, and they soon earned a reputation as passionate, if occasionally overwhelming, guests. At a Malaysian casino hotel in 2005, some three hundred Chinese visitors were issued special meal coupons bearing cartoon pig faces. The hotel said that the illustrations

were simply to differentiate Chinese guests from Muslims, who don't eat pork, but the offended Chinese tourists staged a sit-in, singing the national anthem.

Most countries begin to send large numbers of tourists overseas only when the average citizen has a disposable income of five thousand dollars. But China—where urban residents are at barely half that level—has made travel affordable by booking tickets in bulk and bargaining mercilessly for hotels in distant suburbs. Last year, more than fifty-seven million Chinese people went abroad, ranking China third worldwide in international tourism. The World Tourism Organization predicts that before the end of the decade China will double that.

Europe, initially, was an afterthought. In 2000, more Chinese tourists visited tiny Macao than visited all the countries of Europe combined. But gradually Chinese visitors began staking out a grand tour of their own design. Just as apparatchiks once flocked to Marx's house, Chinese literature lovers began trooping to a muddy riverbank on the campus of Cambridge University to glimpse a specific stand of willow trees. Xu Zhimo, an adored early-twentieth-century poet who studied in the West, described the willows as "young brides in the setting sun." When I passed through Cambridge not long ago, Chinese visitors were posing for pictures beside the river while other tourists streamed by. Wang Yixiong, a twenty-three-year-old physicist originally from Henan Province, was on his third visit to town, and this time he had brought a blushing economics student named Chen Si. "We fell in love with each other not long ago," he told me. "Cambridge is a romantic place."

The French hotel group Accor began adding Chinese television and Mandarin-speaking staff. Others were moving beds away from windows, as dictated by feng-shui. The more the Chinese went to Europe, the cheaper tours became. By 2009, a British travel-industry report had concluded that "Europe" was such a successful "single, unified" brand in China that individual countries would be wise to put aside pride and delay promoting "sub-brands" such as France or Italy. Europe was less a region on the map than a state of mind, and bundling as many countries as possible into a single week appealed to workers with precious few opportunities to travel. "In China, if you can get ten things for a hundred dollars, that's still better than getting one thing for a hundred dollars," Li said.

I strolled back to the bus from Marx's house with a young couple from Shanghai: Guo Yanjin, a relaxed twenty-nine-year-old who called herself Karen and worked in the

finance department of an auto-parts company, and her husband, Gu Xiaojie, an administrative clerk in the department of environmental sanitation, who went by the English name Handy. He had an easy charm and the build of a lineman, six feet tall and barrel-chested. His sweater was maroon and bore an appliqué of a golf bag, but when I asked if he was a golfer he laughed. “Golf is a rich man’s game,” he said.

Handy and Karen had saved up for months for this trip and also received a boost from their parents. Guide Li had urged us not to ruin our vacations by worrying too much about money—he suggested that we pretend the price tags were in yuan instead of euros—but Handy and Karen kept an eye on every cent. Within a few days, they could tell me exactly how much we’d spent on each bottle of water in five countries.

Back on the gold bus, rolling west across the wintry scrub of Champagne-Ardenne, Li wanted to add an important exception to his demands for efficiency. “We have to get used to the fact that Europeans sometimes move slowly,” he said. When shopping in China, he went on, “we’re accustomed to three of us putting our items on the counter at the same time, and then the old lady gives change to three people without making a mistake. Europeans don’t do that.” He continued, “I’m not saying that they’re stupid. If they were, they wouldn’t have developed all this technology, which requires very subtle calculations. They just deal with math in a different way.”

He ended with some advice: “Let them do things their way, because if we’re rushing then they’ll feel rushed, and that will put them in a bad mood, and then we’ll think that they’re discriminating against us, which is not necessarily the case.”

At times, he marvelled at Europe’s high standard of living—bombarding us with statistics on the price of Bordeaux wines or the average height of a well-fed Dutchman—but, if there was ever a time when Chinese visitors marvelled at Europe’s economy, this was not that time. Li made a great show of acting out a Mediterranean life style: “Wake up slowly, brush teeth, make a cup of espresso, take in the aroma.” The crowd laughed. “With a pace like that, how can their economies keep growing? It’s impossible.” He added, “In this world, only when you have diligent, hardworking people will the nation’s economy grow.”

I dozed off, and awoke on the outskirts of Paris. We followed the Seine west and passed the Musée d’Orsay just as the sun bore through the clouds. Li shouted, “Feel the

openness of the city!” Cameras whirred, and he pointed out that central Paris had no skyscrapers. “In Shanghai, unless you’re standing right next to the Huangpu River, you can’t get any sense of the city, because there are too many tall buildings.” Europeans, he added, “preserve anything old and valuable.”

At a dock beside the Pont de l’Alma, we boarded a double-decker boat, and as it chugged upriver I chatted with Zhu Zhongming, a forty-six-year-old accountant who was travelling with his wife and daughter. He had grown up in Shanghai and had ventured into real estate just as the local market was surging. “Whenever you bought something, you could make a ton of money,” he said. He was charismatic, with large dimpled cheeks framing a permanent, mischievous smile, and he’d been going abroad since 2004, so others in the group deferred to him. He was drawn to Europe, above all, because of “culture.” (In Chinese surveys, “culture” often leads the list of terms that people associate with Europe. On the negative side, top results include “arrogant” and “poor-quality Chinese food.”)

The boat reached Pont Sully, and turned slowly against the whitecaps on the Seine to head back downriver. Zhu said that Chinese interest in Europe contained a deeply personal motivation: “When Europe was ruling the world, China was strong as well. So why did we fall behind? We’ve been thinking about that ever since.” Indeed, the question of why a civilization that had printing six hundred years before Gutenberg slumped in the fifteenth century runs like a central nerve through China’s analysis of its past and its prospects for a return to greatness. Zhu offered an explanation: “Once we were invaded, we didn’t respond quickly enough.” It was a narrative of victimhood and decline that I’d often heard in China. (Historians also tend to blame the stifling effects of bureaucracy and authoritarianism, among other factors.) But Zhu did not trace all of China’s troubles to foreign invaders. “We cast aside our three core ideas—Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism—and that was a mistake. We were taught Marxist revolutionary ideas from 1949 to 1978.” He paused and watched his wife and daughter snapping photographs at the railing, an orange sun sinking into the city beyond them. “We spent thirty years on what we now know was a disaster,” he said.

The boat docked, and we headed to dinner, walking through the crowds and din of the city for the first time. Karen hugged Handy’s arm, their heads swivelling. We followed Li into a small Chinese storefront, down a flight of stairs, and into a hot, claustrophobic

hallway flanked by windowless rooms jammed with Chinese diners. It was a hive of activity invisible from the street, a parallel Paris. There were no empty seats, so Li motioned for us to continue out the back door, where we turned left and entered a second restaurant, also Chinese. Down another staircase, into another windowless room, where dishes arrived: pork braised in brown sauce, bok choy, egg-drop soup, spicy chicken.

Twenty minutes later, we climbed the stairs out into the night, hustling after Li down the block to the Galeries Lafayette, the ten-story department store on the Boulevard Haussmann. The store appeared happily poised for an onslaught from the East: it was decked in red bunting and cartoon bunnies for the Year of the Rabbit. We received Chinese-language welcome cards promising happiness, longevity, and a ten-per-cent discount. On the sixth floor, a restaurant called Sichuan Panda was serving dinner.

Our group moved with purpose. Promise and his parents, followed by Zhu Zhongming and family, turned right, after the Rolex counter, and headed into a luminous Louis Vuitton boutique. A corps of Mandarin-speaking salesgirls, in matching neckerchiefs, worked the counters. On average, a Chinese tourist buys more than a thousand dollars' worth of tax-free stuff abroad—more luxury bags, watches, and designer clothes than any other nationality, including the Japanese, according to Global Blue, the tax-free-shopping refund service. Chinese tourists abroad spend nearly twice as much on shopping as they do on hotel rooms. Several in our group told me how sorry they were that we weren't stopping at a place called Aotelaise. The name baffled me. Someone explained that it's a new Chinese word: "outlets."

Promise's mother, Li Ying, pulled out a stack of printouts bearing photographs and model numbers of purses. She tried one after another, swaying back and forth before the mirror, frowning at her reflection. Handy and Karen took one look at the prices and kept walking. Zhu Zhongming urged Li Ying to find a bag with "more nobility." "That one looks like the same junk we have on the mainland," he said. She tried a large bag called the Artsy, which cost about fourteen hundred dollars. It had a tan strap and miniature "LV"s tattooed across its chocolate hide. "What do you think?" she asked, and everyone nodded. "I'll take it."

That night, we stayed at a hotel in the suburbs called the Dream Castle. It had coats of arms in the lobby and a giant statue of a king in flowing robes.

En route to the Eiffel Tower, the next morning, we passed a group of African street vendors, and Li mentioned that the city is a magnet for illegal immigrants. "They don't have a *hukou*," he said—the document needed to live permanently in a Chinese city. "Why haven't they been arrested? Because it's exhausting to arrest them, feed them, and send them home, when they'll fly right back again tomorrow." I didn't sense overwhelming sympathy. The Chinese have been the world's most abundant migrants, but these days many believe that they have better job prospects at home than abroad. Li joked that Americans and Europeans should be more concerned about Chinese visitors buying up prime real estate. "The European economy is in decline," he said bluntly. "Times have changed."

He pointed out the grounds of the French Parliament, which he said had been the site of a recent protest against raising the retirement age, a protest that he found baffling. "Can a place where workers go on strike every day grow economically? Certainly not," he said. "People here are strangely used to it. Their laws on public demonstrations are very mature. As long as you apply to the government, you have the right to protest on a predetermined route." This is their "routine way of demanding their rights," he said, though he didn't think it was good for tourism. "You can be stuck at one spot for four hours because the streets are blocked. I hope that you all will never encounter a terrible situation like that."

By midmorning, we were done with the Eiffel Tower and had set off for Versailles. A Chinese-speaking guide met us at the palace gate and led us upstairs. In one of Marie Antoinette's chambers, the Salon des Nobles de la Reine, he pointed out a blue vase of "beautiful Chinese porcelain, which was stolen from us and brought here." The Hall of Mirrors, he said, was host not only to royal galas but also to the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, in June, 1919—a notorious document in Chinese history, because it allowed German territory in Shandong Province to be placed under Japanese control.

At the Louvre, we picked up another Chinese-speaking guide, a hummingbird of a woman, who shouted, "We have lots to see in ninety minutes, so we need to pick up our feet!" She darted ahead beneath a furred purple umbrella, which she used as a rallying flag, and without breaking stride she taught us some French using Chinese sounds: *bonjour* could be approximated by pronouncing the Chinese characters *ben* and *zhu*, which mean, fittingly, "to chase someone." We raced after her

through the turnstile, and Wang Zhenyu, the pants manufacturer, tried out his new French on the security guard: “*Ben zhu, ben zhu!*”

The guide advised us to focus most on the *san bao*—the three treasures—the Winged Victory of Samothrace, the Venus de Milo, and the Mona Lisa. We crowded around each in turn, flanked by other Chinese tour groups as identifiable as rival armies: red pins for the U-Tour travel agency, orange windbreakers for the students from Shenzhen. We’d been going non-stop since before dawn, but the air was charged with diligent curiosity. When we discovered that the elevators were a long detour from our route, I wondered how Huang Xueqing, in her wheelchair, would get to see much of the museum. Then her relatives carried her chair while she hobbled up and down each marble stairway, and rolled her in front of the masterpieces.

By nightfall, another day of touring Europe’s finest sights had kindled a sense of appreciation, albeit with a competitive streak. While we waited for tables—at a Chinese restaurant—Zhu brought up the Zhou dynasty (1046-256 B.C.), the era that produced Confucius, Lao-tzu, and other pillars of Chinese thought. “Back then, we were damn good!” Zhu told a group of us. His wife, Wang Jianxin, rolled her eyes. “Here you go again, always talking about the same thing,” she said. Zhu was wearing a recently purchased Eiffel Tower baseball cap with blinking battery-powered lights. He turned to me in search of a fresh audience. “Really, during the Zhou dynasty we were practically the same as ancient Rome or Egypt!”

His wife peered toward the dining room. “How long are we going to have to wait?” she asked. Someone joked that we might do better at McDonald’s, which gave Promise something new to consider. “Does Beijing have the biggest McDonald’s in the world?” he asked me. I wasn’t sure, but Zhu was certain. “The one by the Grand Hyatt—it’s enormous!” he said.

The Grand Tour has been a tradition of newly rich countries ever since young British aristocrats took to the Continent in the eighteenth century, picking up languages, antiques, and venereal disease. Once the railroad arrived, in the mid-nineteenth century, large numbers of Britain’s ballooning middle class followed—“lesser men with less fortunes,” suddenly free to “tumble down the Alps in living avalanches,” in the snuffy words of Lord Normanby, the future British Ambassador to France.

The railroad made it possible for schoolteachers, engineers, and civil servants to go from London to the Alps in less than twenty-four hours, instead of spending weeks in a stagecoach, according to “The Smell of the Continent,” a history of Victorian travel by Richard Mullen and James Munson. In Switzerland, the Londoners and, later, the Americans savored the fresh air, but they found much to complain about elsewhere: Henry James saw Venice as nothing but a “battered peep-show and bazaar.” Everyone complained, above all, about the food: French dishes “stewed in grease” and breakfasts consisting of nothing more “than a thimbleful of coffee or chocolate and a morsel of bread.” Mark Twain, whose 1867 trip to Europe and the eastern Mediterranean produced “The Innocents Abroad,” described American tourists “who talked very loudly and coarsely, and laughed boisterously when all others were so quiet and well behaved.” But, through it all, the journeys changed the travellers in powerful ways. As Samuel Rogers, the English poet, put it, travel sowed in them “doubt of our own exclusive merits.”

By the fourth day on the road, we no longer thought twice about riding three hours in the morning and another three in the afternoon, separated by cultural excursions. When we stopped for snacks and bathroom visits, we spoke to nobody outside our ranks. We were as mobile and self-contained as a cruise ship. On a map, our route resembled the Big Dipper; it started in Germany and looped through Luxembourg and into Paris, before a long southerly swoop through France, over the Alps, and down into Italy as far as Rome. It might have ended there, but instead it did an about-face and doubled back to Milan, for the flight home. (“Every route is largely determined by the plane tickets,” Li explained to me. Wherever the cheapest flights are on a given day, Chinese tours see opportunity.)

The bus had a DVD player, and as we embarked on the seven-hour drive from Paris to the Alps Li put on “Sissi” (1955), an Austrian romantic drama about Princess Elisabeth of Bavaria. The movie was heavy on verdant hillsides, ballroom gowns, and surging orchestral music. Sissi had been dubbed into Chinese (“*Nihao, Franz!*”), and it was a hit with the parents, who remembered when “Sissi” was a sensation on Chinese television, in the eighties. But she didn’t attract much interest from the teen-agers on the bus, and, from his backpack, Promise pulled out a crumpled edition of the *Wall Street Journal* that he’d picked up at the hotel in Luxembourg. He studied each page in silence and elbowed me for help when he came across a headline related to China: “EU FINDS HUAWEI GOT STATE SUPPORT.” The story said that European trade officials believed that the big Chinese technology company Huawei was receiving unfairly cheap loans from state

banks. “Does the American Constitution prevent companies from receiving government support?” Promise asked.

Sissi had a whole trilogy to her name, unfortunately, and we soldiered on to a second DVD. I asked Promise if he used Facebook, which is officially blocked in China but reachable with some tinkering. “It’s too much of a hassle to get to it,” he said. Instead, he uses Renren, a Chinese version, which, like other domestic sites, censors any sensitive political discussion. I asked what he knew about Facebook’s being blocked. “It has something to do with politics,” he said, and paused. “But the truth is I don’t really know.” I recognized that kind of remove among other urbane Chinese students. They have unprecedented access to technology and information, but the barriers erected by the state are just large enough to keep many people from bothering to outwit them. The information that filtered through was erratic: Promise could talk to me at length about the latest Sophie Marceau film or the merits of various Swiss race-car drivers, but the news of Facebook’s role in the Arab uprisings had not reached him.

We stayed in the Swiss town of Interlaken, where Li had promised us “truly clean air,” a treat for residents of any large Chinese city. I stepped outside to look around town with Zheng Dao and her daughter Li Cheng, a nineteen-year-old art major. We strolled past luxury watch shops, a casino, and the Höhematte, a vast green that hosts yodelling and Swiss wrestling events. Midway through the trip, the daughter was politely unmoved. “Other than different buildings, the Seine didn’t look all that different from the Huangpu,” she said. “Subway? We have a subway. You name it, we’ve got it.” She laughed.

As Li Cheng walked on ahead with friends, her mother told me that she wants her daughter to see differences between China and the West that run deeper than “hardware.” Our guide had mocked Europe’s stately pace, but Zheng said her countrymen have come to believe that “if you don’t elbow your way on to everything you’ll be last.” A car paused for us at a crosswalk, and Zheng drew a contrast: Drivers at home think, “I can’t pause. Otherwise, I’ll never get anywhere,” she said.

Not far from Interlaken, we boarded a train that inched up a snowy mountain, bound for an Alpine saddle between the peaks known as the Jungfrauoch. Skiers, flushed and sweaty in fluorescent powder suits, swooshed by, shouting in German and French. We were dressed for train travel, not mountaineering: Liu Yang was in leather thigh-high

boots; Li Cheng wore a white furry hat in the shape of a polar bear, paws reaching down to warm her chin. We chuckled at the Europeans.

The train let us off at a spacious lodge with restaurants and brilliant views of peaks and valleys that stretched to the Black Forest. We ate lunch at 11,388 feet—the Bernese Alps, the Aletsch Glacier, chow mein and spring rolls. The gift shop was overpriced, so Handy and Karen bought a single postcard and mailed it to themselves as a souvenir.

Milan was cold and clear when we arrived the next day. Li said the climate accounted for “why foreigners love to bask in the sun.” Pursuing a tan is anathema in China, where women vigilantly cover their skin to avoid the bronze of a laborer. “Westerners’ skin will turn red and then quickly turn white again,” he said. He went on, “After someone has turned red, he can go back and show others, and they will know that he’s been travelling on vacation.” China was so isolated for so long that stereotypes about outsiders have an especially long half-life. Li peppered his lectures with his observations: South Koreans have square jaws, Western men are covered in short, dark hair, and Italian men grow long eyelashes, which they “flutter like fans” at unsuspecting women.

We had thirty minutes to wander in downtown Milan, so Karen and Handy and I stepped into the cool interior of the Duomo. Handy peered up at soaring sheets of stained glass. “That looks exhausting,” he said. “But it’s beautiful.” A few hours earlier, Li had reminded us again to be on guard against thieves, but Handy said, “Italy is not as chaotic as they made it seem. It sounded really terrifying.” He was a sanitation specialist by training, and he couldn’t help but notice Milan’s abundant graffiti and overstuffed trash bins. As Li had explained it, “The government wants to clean, but it doesn’t have enough money.” Handy tried to be polite, but he said, “If it was like this in Shanghai, old folks would be calling us all afternoon to complain.”

The Italian papers were full of news that Prime Minister Berlusconi was about to be charged with sleeping with a teen-ager. Li was diplomatic. “What a unique man he is!” he said. The drive across Italy that day had put him in a reflective mood about life at home. “You might wonder now and then whether it would be good to promote democracy,” he said. “Of course, there are benefits: people enjoy freedom of speech and the freedom to elect politicians. But doesn’t the one-party system have its benefits, too?” He pointed out the window to the highway and said that it had taken decades for Italy to build it, because of local opposition. “If this were China, it would be done in six months!

And that's the only way to keep the economy growing." Li was so boosterish that I might have taken him for a government spokesman, except that his comments were familiar from ordinary conversations in Beijing. "Analysts overseas can never understand why the Chinese economy has grown so fast," he said. "Yes, it's a one-party state, but the administrators are selected from among the élites, and élites picked from 1.3 billion people might as well be called super-élites."

Li's portrait of the West contained at least one feature of unalloyed admiration. He mentioned a Western friend who had quit his job to go backpacking and find his calling in life. "Would our parents accept that? Of course not! They'd point a finger and say, 'You're a waste!' " he said. But, in Europe, "young people are allowed to pursue what they want to pursue."

He went on, "Our Chinese ancestors left us so many things, but why do we find it so difficult to discover new things? It's because our education system has too many constraints." Our group was even more attentive than usual. At the very moment that American parents were wondering if they had something to learn from China's purportedly hard-nosed "tiger mothers," Chinese parents were trying to restore creativity to the country's desiccated education system. One mother, Zeng Liping, told me that teachers had frowned upon her bringing her sixth grader to Europe. "Before every school vacation, the teachers tell them, 'Don't go out. Stay at home and study, because very soon you'll be taking the exam to get into middle school.' " But Zeng had made her peace with being out of step. She had quit a stable job as an art teacher and put her savings into starting her own fashion label. "My bosses all said, 'What a shame that you're leaving a good workplace.' But I've proved to myself that I made the right choice."

We reached Venice in the early afternoon, and people were hungry, urging Li to stop even if there wasn't a Chinese restaurant. We had been in Europe for a week and had yet to sit down to a lunch or a dinner that was not Chinese. (Nearly half of all Chinese tourists in one market survey reported eating no more than one "European style" meal on a trip to the West.) But Li warned that Western food would take too long to serve, and he recalled a five-hour dinner in Spain. "If you eat Western food too fast, you'll get an upset stomach," he added. "Save it for your next trip." Everyone consented, and we stopped for a twenty-minute lunch at La Pagoda Ristorante Cinese, on the outskirts of town. In Venice, we crisscrossed the lagoon by ferry, visited a glass factory, rented a fleet of black

gondolas, and had time for a quick stop at Prada before heading back out of town. On the way to La Pagoda for dinner, Zhu picked up a local real-estate circular. “Look at this—a hundred and ten thousand euros for a house!” he cried. “Cheaper than America. Much cheaper than Shanghai!”

In Rome the next day, we stopped at the Trevi Fountain, where tall Senegalese men were selling counterfeit Louis Vuitton bags and vendors tended carts offering cheap magnets and paperweights. Handy gazed at them and said, “Made in China.” At the Vatican, Zhu took in the full scale of St. Peter’s Square. “Pretty impressive!” he said. “Their Pope can just stick his head out anytime he wants and watch all of us down here? I bet he doesn’t get any happier than that.” The scale reminded him of Beijing. “It’s just like the old days, when Chinese people used to go to Beijing just to catch a glimpse of the Communist Party.” He laughed.

We wandered down the block and sat down to rest on a windowsill. Zhu lit a cigarette. He’d been thinking about the fluctuating fortunes of great powers. I asked if he believed American politicians who say they have no objections to China’s rise. He shook his head. “No way. They’ll let us grow, but they’ll try to limit it. Everyone I know thinks that.” Ultimately, he said, in the politest way he could think of, Americans would need to adjust to a weaker position in the world, just as China once did. “You are so used to being on top, but you will drop to second place. It won’t be immediately—it’ll take twenty or thirty years—but our G.D.P. will eventually surpass yours.” I was struck that, for all his travels, Zhu saw an enduring philosophical divide between China and the West: “two different ways of thinking,” as he put it. “We will use their tools and learn their methods. But, fundamentally, China will always maintain its own way,” he said.

His sentiment didn’t inspire much optimism about China’s future alongside the West. On some level, it was hard to argue with him; the myth that a richer China would soon become a Western, democratic China has rarely looked more frayed than it does today. But if it was naïve to imagine that China’s opening up would draw it close to the West, it is also naïve, perhaps, to dismiss the power of more subtle changes. Modern Chinese travel, like the modern Chinese state, is predicated on the fragile promise that it will impose order on a chaotic world, by shepherding its citizens and keeping them safe from threats that can include Western thieves and Western cuisine. In the flesh, the world our group encountered was, indeed, more Europe than “Europe”—unkempt and unglamorous

in ways that Sissi never mentioned. And yet, behind Berlusconi's opera buffa and the prosperity gospel about Chinese one-party efficiency, my busmates caught unredacted flickers of insight. On this first trip, there was much they would never see—a rowdy free press, a social safety net forged by political wrangling—but, mile by mile, they were quietly discovering how to see it at all. When Promise finally put down his wilted copy of the *Wall Street Journal*, there were no trumpets. He said simply, “When I read a foreign newspaper, I see lots of things I don't know about.”

The three-hour drive to Florence was our last long bus trip, and Li raced through some topics, including Catholics and divorce, Pavarotti, balsamic vinegar, truffles and the pigs that find them, and leather goods that are marked as Italian but made in China. He once had a leather-factory boss on a trip to Italy, he said, who spent the time collecting samples of Italian products to replicate at home.

The Piazza della Signoria was a riot of sun-pinked Russians, American students, and cops in white thimble-shaped helmets. A local guide steered us into a leather shop called Peruzzi, where purses and shoes were displayed with the motto “If you don't take home a Peruzzi souvenir, you can't prove you have been to Florence.”

We were about to reboard the bus for another ninety minutes, to snatch a photo of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. But then something strange happened: people said no. Handy, Karen, and a few others wondered why we couldn't skip the tower and linger in Florence. Li gathered everyone in the shadow of the bus and said, “Whoever wants to go, raise your hand.” Two-thirds or so of the hands went up. A woman's voice urged solidarity—“We should all go together.” After a minute of discussion, Li called for another straw poll, and it was clear that some of the mutineers had been winnowed. A consensus of a certain kind washed over the group, and we all dutifully lined up for the bus. Handy lifted his eyebrows and said, “Voting Chinese style will always end this way.”

On the highway to Pisa, I wondered how much longer Chinese tours at this pace might endure. Solo tourism was growing in popularity among the young people, and even in the course of our time together my fellow-tourists had wearied of hustling so much. When we reached Pisa and its charmingly goofy tower, each of us took turns standing at the perfect spot, grimacing, arms outstretched, for the photo of ourselves holding up the tower. There was a spectacular blue sky above. Huang Xueqing got up from her wheelchair, to feel the cobblestones beneath her feet. We worked up an appetite, and I

pointed out a Chinese restaurant not far from the tower. Handy and Karen had another idea, and I followed them into a McDonald's. ♦

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