

五十四

I was feeling complacent
on the train to Gansu
reading Renmin Ribao
eating Mapo Doufu
Watched the Huang He meander
through loess plateau corn
on a crumbling Great Wall
heard a Tibetan horn



Chapter 54 – On the Train to Gansu

In the early 2000s there were three types of tickets foreigners could buy for trains in China. Soft sleeper was the premier class. There were four beds to a coach and once situated, you could shut the door and keep the smoke out of your room. This worked best if you were traveling in a group of four. Of course, it could work the other way as well if you were a group of three. There was no way of knowing who might be the wild card if there were only three of you. If the 4th person was a smoker, the shut door would also keep the smoke in. An added benefit to many foreigners was that the soft sleeper cars usually had access to a sit-down toilet. For those not accustomed to squat toilets, train toilets could create additional challenges.

Squat toilets were the norm in almost all parts of China. Actually, squat toilets are praised by many as being healthier and more hygienic than the sit-down toilets we are accustomed to in the west. The squat, itself is a more natural position for relieving oneself. It serves to align the intestines more naturally thus reducing the strain and discomfort often associated with bowel movements. For those of us on the far side of middle age, it can also help with mobility and leg strength since it does better engage core muscles. There are also multiple how-to's on YouTube which teach you how to use a squat toilet properly. These include deciding what to do with your pants, how to stand and which way to face before squatting, the squat itself, and even the clean-up afterward. A word of caution: If there is a trash can next to the toilet, that most likely means that is where you should deposit your used toilet paper. Not all plumbing systems are equipped to flush toilet paper. If there is a large bucket of water and a small empty bucket, fill the empty bucket from the full bucket. That will be what you will use to clean yourself and/or to flush the toilet. One of my favorite toilet memories in China was visiting the toilet at the US Consulate in Beijing where the sign read "Please do not stand on the toilet seat."



Aside from lack of access to a sit-down toilet, hard sleepers were actually more fun than soft sleepers. There were two sets of three-layered bunks in each open-door section. Although you often had to scrounge for a place to store your bags, once you finally settled into your bunk, the ride was every bit as comfortable as the soft sleeper. For kids, it was like a giant sleepover and was a highlight of many of their China trips.



Seats were fine for short rides of a few hours and there were different categories of seats as well. Tickets to the cheaper seats would be sold with no seat number and people could sit anywhere they could park their bums. During the busiest time of the year - the Spring Festival aka Chinese New Year - desperate people would even sit inside the W.C.

From Hohhot (呼和浩特 Hūhéhàotè) to 包头市 Bāotóu, both in Inner Mongolia, is a little over 100 miles. We boarded the hard sleeper in Hohhot, following the northernmost plateau of the Yellow River before it dipped down just north of the Ordos Desert

(鄂爾多斯沙漠 È'ěrdūōsī Shāmò) still in Inner Mongolia. flowing towards Yinchuan (银川市 Yínchūānshì) in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region (宁夏回族自治区 Níngxià Huízú Zìzhìqū) and ending in 兰州市 Lánzhōu, 甘肃省 Gānsù Province. For a little while starting in Yinchuan, we were close enough to the Great Wall to almost see it. Even if we didn't see it, we knew it was there.



On the train trip from Inner Mongolia down to Gansu, we saw monks in robes, Tibetan steles, and prayer flags, all indicators that Buddhism in this part of China was more similar to Tibetan Buddhism than the Buddhism we had experienced in the southern and eastern parts of China. It was like traveling from America's east coast megalopolis into the corn belt of the mid-west. The pace and the mannerisms seemed somehow different.