

# WHO MOVED MY RICE?

## Prologue

My cat is from Hong Kong.

My wife is from Melbourne, Australia.

Before I moved to Asia, I lived in a place called Watha, North Carolina, USA. Population 98.

How, you may wonder, did this old redneck wind up teaching English in Hangzhou, China?

Or maybe you just wonder why we brought a cat with us. Everyone in Hangzhou wonders the same thing, as do fans all over the world. Fans of the cat, that is. She was featured in the SPCA's A-Cat-A-Day Calendar for 2002 (she got three days), and friends in Hong Kong have shipped her Japanese cat food.

I spent thirteen years in North Carolina, all up and down the east coast. Then thirteen years in Tampa Florida. Then 10 years in Watha.

I had a great job. I owned a beautiful house that Daddy and I built. We drew up the plans over the kitchen table as we emptied a case of beer.

I had the love of two beautiful ladies. One was a mostly-black Border collie mix and the other was a black half-dachshund/half-Doberman. (That's not a typo.)

So you may wonder how I wound up selling my house, giving away my dogs, flying halfway around the world, and quitting my job via email.

(Years before that, we had an employee quit by fax. I joked then that I'd be the first to quit by email. When I said it, I was only joking. Really.)

It started with a holiday. My first in over twenty years. It was a one-month holiday in Hong Kong. (China with English subtitles, I thought. Wrong!) There, I met a lovely Australian lady who was teaching English. We fell in love and I never left. Instead, I married her.

The hardest thing about leaving the US was giving up those dogs. I love dogs. More importantly, I love those dogs. But I gave them to Daddy. He gave them to a buddy who has a three-acre spread with many cows. The border collie, Daisy, was born to herd cows, and she taught her trusty sidekick, Bebe the Wonder Weiner, how to do the same.

Okay, you're wondering how I could mention giving up my dogs ahead of leaving my family. My brother killed himself when I was 22. Mom died of a burst aneurysm when I was 26. Both these events happened on Mom's birthday. Part of moving back to North Carolina and building

that house with Daddy was getting to know him again. He's my family now, and I gave him my dogs.

I spent a little over two years in Hong Kong. While my wife worked her butt off as a teacher in a system that could stand an overhaul, I stayed home and turned myself into an author. A childhood dream. I couldn't legally work in Hong Kong at the time, so I used the Internet to work in America.

I wound up publishing four books. My least favorite of the bunch was an award finalist. My favorite sold less than 50 copies. Go figure.

I became an editor for several North American publishers. I became a book reviewer and a judge for the Dream Realm Awards. I briefly became a reporter and editor for an English-language educational magazine in Hong Kong.

Then, finally, my wife and I decided we'd had enough of the Hong Kong rat race and moved to Hangzhou. Now we're both teachers. I still edit for some US publishers in my spare time. Sometimes I telecommute back to Hong Kong as a legal transcriptionist. My wife's been teaching all her post-university life. I'm learning from her by osmosis, or something.

I'd always wanted to be a teacher when I grew up. I can't say that I've grown up yet, but at the ripe old age of 40 I'm a teacher.

When I was an elementary school student, there was such a thing as a scholastic scholarship. Fine by me. My grades were quite good. But by the time I finished high school, the only scholarships available were based on financial need.

There were four of us in the household, and three of us had full-time minimum-wage jobs. Yes, I was one of the three. Meaning, we were too poor to afford university but too rich to get financial aid. So, I went to a tech school instead and picked up an A.S. Degree in Electronics Technology. I used it six years later, at a wonderful job that lasted about a year and a half. I haven't used it since.

So, to make a long story short, this old boy isn't qualified to teach in the US. But in China, since I speak English as my native language, I can teach it. And I do.

Which is more boring? Teachers talking about teaching to non-teachers, writers talking about writing to non-writers, or Al Gore in Speedos? I don't know, but rest assured you will see none of those here.

Okay, I wrote two paragraphs about writing, so now I'll write two about teaching. None about Kim Beasley in Speedos.

I have taught Oral English, a veritable trial by fire. No papers to correct, but lots of preparation and lots of classroom resistance. "We are Chinese. We do not speak in class." I overcame their shyness, and mine, and am glad I no longer teach that subject. Advanced Audio-Visual, which

involved selecting movies my students would like and which I could watch six consecutive times without getting bored out of my skull, then showing the DVDs and discussing them afterwards. And the grand prize, Advanced English Writing for 18 months and counting. Lots of papers to correct there--154 a week for 16 or perhaps even 32 weeks--but I still love it.

My students have finished secondary school, what people in the US would call high school. They're attending the Zhejiang University of Science and Technology. And they're stuck with me. A crazy old redneck out of small town North Carolina. The Deep South.

There are a number of excellent books about China. Authors such as Nien Cheng, Peter Hessler, Bill Holm, Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, and Xinran come to mind. They are observant, knowledgeable, literate, and analytical. They bring understanding and intelligence to a difficult subject.

I don't.

According to reporter Jimmy Breslin, who interviewed the gravedigger on the night John F. Kennedy died, "The bigger the story, the smaller your focus." China is a subject too big for this ole boy to focus on, so I'm not even trying. I'm writing about hot beef noodles, cold beer, cats, veterinarians, loud noises, and learning to mime because my spoken Chinese is downright pathetic.

It's possible that you'll come away from this mosaic having a feel of what our lives are like here, and how much this country has changed me. I don't promise it. I'd be happy if you laughed once every few pages, even if you're only faking it.

This mosaic may also strike you as a bit chaotic. To me, Hangzhou is like that. Heck, I'm like that. Again, I don't promise you that this book is 100% accurate. It's just what I saw, what I felt, what I thought.

My wife and I are having lots of fun. This is our story. Mostly, it's my story. Many of these articles originally appeared in my free newsletter, which evolved from a monthly to a weekly. In reading them again, I have to laugh at how naive I was when I first arrived here.

And, don't forget, this story involves a cat. A very special Calico cat. She sits on my shoulder to watch me pee. Her name is Picasso. She's a work of art. To know her is to love her.

So kick back, grab a coffee or a beer, and enjoy. I know I have.

Michael LaRocca

August 9, 2003

# Chapter One

## First Impressions of Hangzhou

### February 6, 2002

The short version can be stated in four words: I love it here!

Some of you may have read what I wrote about our Guilin honeymoon in a previous book. Many of those things that I loved so much about Guilin were immediately evident in my new home. Some I'd forgotten.

Beautiful scenery, no skyscrapers, and so much quieter than Hong Kong. Nicer people, and I don't really mean to insult Hong Kong with that statement. But folks in Hong Kong tend to be close to their families, obsessed with doing their jobs and accumulating wealth, and willfully ignorant of anything else about their surroundings. Hangzhou is different. Same thing I noticed in Guilin. Here, people like talking to other people.

A common vehicle in Guilin is the Volkswagen Santana. They're also common here, and now I know why. They're the result of the first successful joint venture between Shanghai and the Germans. Every taxi (and every police car) I've seen here is a Volkswagen Santana. I love that name, even though it probably has nothing to do with the musician.

Here we also have the bicycles that have been converted via chain or belt drive into three-wheelers and covered with sheet metal to act as mini-trucks. Some have seats back there. They're called pedicabs. And there are also the motorcycles that have been likewise converted, the motorized pedicabs.

The bicycles. Remember that little rack across the back fender for carrying things? People sit on them sideways here. Folks with kids strap chairs back there, and the tiniest little dudes can hang on without any trouble. I've seen a new modification. Now those chairs are covered in case of bad weather, usually with flashy plastic things that have cartoon characters on them.

Another new thing to me. Bicycle lanes. In Guilin, I saw all kinds of vehicles sharing the road in harmony. Here, if you stand in front of a building, you see the sidewalk. Beyond that, the bicycle lane. Beyond that, a barrier. Beyond that, the road. Beyond that, another barrier, another bicycle lane, another sidewalk, and then more buildings.

Another new thing here is the buses running via wires strung up high like cable car wires. Talk about innovation in environmentalism.

I love our flat. Standing in the sunroom, looking out the window and just watching traffic. Folks can ride their bicycles side by side and carry on a conversation. Plus, the flat's much roomier than what I'd gotten used to in Hong Kong. The tallest buildings I've seen are about six stories, not the glass and steel monstrosity that is Hong Kong.

You know how some places preserve the old buildings in a historic district, and elsewhere they just tear down everything and build new skyscrapers? I prefer the Hangzhou approach. If the old building works, leave it. If you need a new one, pop it in. So I can see old concrete and new glass-steel side by side.

It took me at least five minutes to realize we were driving on the right side of the road. Just like back home in the US. Opposite from Hong Kong. Not that it's really a big deal. I haven't driven in over two years anyway.

Hangzhou, incidentally, has six million people. Three million in the city, three million in the suburbs. That's a long way from where I lived before traveling to Asia. Watha, North Carolina, population 98.

Back in Guilin, my tour guide told me it was a very small city. Only 200,000 people. Very small. I whipped out Watha's population and watched his eyes bug out. I will do that to someone in Hangzhou.

Our plane landed, and we hauled out the luggage, in the ridiculously large weight of 90 kg. About 200 lb, I think. I want to kiss the man who thought of putting wheels on suitcases.

We were met by our future employer, "Harry" Huang Haijun. Our Foreign Affairs Officer. The man most responsible for determining whether our lives in China would be heaven or hell. I didn't know it when I arrived, but he may be the best there is. He genuinely cares about people. His name is known by many Westerners who have never taught at this school. Most schools have less than six Westerners, and most FAOs have at least two assistants. Harry was working with eight Westerners and no assistant, and he still met us at the airport personally.

Harry also brought a driver. Three bags, three men. No problem. Into the van, then through the city.

My first sight was of some beautiful homes mixed in with much farmland. When I say beautiful, think dollhouse. It's the best analogy I can come up with. Four stories high, not exactly large, decorated as if there were wallpaper running along them. Many colors, many with polka dots and such. No two alike. Laundry drying on the bushes and trees.

Then, the suspension bridge. Then the busy city, and finally our flat.

That's where I met my first non-English speaker. Right at the entrance to my apartment is a locksmith's stand. He does almost no business that I've seen, but he has a comfortable leather chair and people come visit him all day long just to talk.

I was finally able to say "Ni hao." I learned that phrase three years ago when a coworker went to Beijing. But that's Mandarin, and the folks in Hong Kong speak Cantonese, so I couldn't use it before.

When we arrived, four or five security guards joined us to haul up the luggage. They didn't want me to help, but I did anyway. Gotta be a redneck, you know.

One hour later, we had unpacked all that stuff and were going out for dinner. My wife and I, another Western couple who teaches here, and Harry. At the restaurant we met the head of the Foreign Languages Department. That's our department, as English is a foreign language here.

We were a great mix, incidentally. By nature, my wife and I aren't big talkers. Neither are Harry and his associate. But that was fine, because the other Western couple loves to take over a social gathering.

We were escorted past the public dining area and into a private room. Total privacy to talk about the job, the fact that four countries were represented by the six people at the table, snow, or whatever. Yup, it may snow here. I haven't seen snow in about 25 years, back when I used to see it every year at Christmastime.

In the center of the round table was a rotating gizmo, where the servers regularly placed different dishes. Hangzhou is known for its country cooking. As I've written elsewhere, my favorite Chinese food is country cooking.

I had to shake the rust off my chopstick skills again, and then I ate many foods I can't name but which were wonderful. I even tried the Mountain Frog, brought to the table on a steaming plate and with a dramatic flourish. Excellent. I chose not to eat the skins, though. Likewise on the fish.

On my third bowl of soup, when I picked out the bird head, I simply put it to the side and ate the soup it had been in. Yummy.

Seriously, it took me two years of living in Hong Kong (China Lite) before I got up the courage to do what I should've been doing all along, which is trying new things.

That's one thing I love about living in Asia. You know how you do stuff the same way you've always done it, just because that's how you've always done it? Nothing wrong with that, but one should try looking at that stuff from a different point of view sometimes.

It's also great fun to look at building after building, sidewalk stand after sidewalk stand, bustle of activity after bustle of activity, and have absolutely no clue what any of it is.

At one point, Harry asked his colleague (in Chinese) where one could buy cat food. Actually, he said dog food. His colleague misunderstood the question, and told me (in English), "Yes, you can get dog meat at this restaurant."

Yes, our cat was definitely the center of attention long before her arrival. The other Western couple asked us, "Is she a special breed?" She's not, but she's still quite special.

Culturally, China's not so far from Hong Kong. The only adjustment for me is that almost nobody speaks English and the signs aren't bilingual. But for the other Western couple, all is new and different.

Chinese toilets seem to be a big deal. They're a hole in the ground that one must squat over. Also, one always carries tissues because there is no toilet paper in them. The lady has no kneecaps, thus she can't squat. Instead, she has to take off her pants and aim at the hole standing. But that's only in public and on one of the campuses. In all our flats are Western toilets. I can use either type just fine.

As for the language, Mandarin is one I can learn. I'm picking it up slowly although I usually get the tones wrong, I've got my phrase books, and Harry was kind enough to give us a printed list of places we might want to go with the names in both languages so we can point for the taxi drivers.

Many years ago, I found myself working on an all-Mexican hog farm. As I taught my coworkers English--they were quite eager to learn--they taught me Spanish. I've forgotten it since then, except for the profanity. But I can see myself learning Mandarin as quickly as I once learned Spanish, so I know I'll be fine.

The next morning, we piled into a van along with Harry, the other Western couple, a driver, and a professor from the IT department. We were told it was to go to a supermarket. This is another joint venture between the Chinese and the Germans.

It's not a supermarket, folks. It's a massive venture that makes Sam's Club back in the US look small. I kid you not, it sells anything and everything known to man. So now, when Harry pops off for his vacation, nobody will die of starvation while he's gone.

Before we left for that supermarket, a lovely old lady grabbed my arm and spoke to my wife and me in Mandarin. She pointed at our flat and at the campus. Just that fast, she knew where we lived and where we worked. She's wonderful. I must learn her language simply to talk to her.

Since then, I've been to another large supermarket. Three stories. Clothes on the first floor. Then up to the third for hardware, bedding, bathroom and more clothes. Then down to the second for food and checkout lanes. Utter chaos. They shop like they drive. They're loud. People with bullhorns advertising their wares. My legs are bruised and my ears are ringing.

We were given many apologies about the condition of the flat. No microwave or shower curtain yet, for example, and the TV didn't have cable yet. This is because we arrived in the middle of the Lunar New Year celebration. Many of our co-workers are on holiday. As is everybody. But we knew that before we got here. We just wanted to get out of Hong Kong.

Harry was obviously afraid that we'd be left alone wandering the streets or something. But guess what? We like it that way. That's why we're here now and not in three weeks when the job starts. Time to play tourist! Oh yeah, and settle in and such.

The flat is larger than what we were renting in Hong Kong. The school is providing it to us. They have on-campus housing and off-campus housing. We chose off. Meaning, right next door to the campus where we can watch guards marching or kids playing and such. There is always something interesting to watch out the windows. Who needs cable anyway?

The flat has a large bedroom, a kitchen with dining room, a shower and laundry room, a small bathroom with Western toilet, and an office/workroom almost as large as the bedroom. Leading from there is an enclosed balcony with windows all around. We call it the sunroom. Also known as the cat's room.

I saw that we had a brand new washing machine, but no dryer. Did you ever wonder why you use an electric dryer when air-drying works just as well?

So I looked up at the ceiling of my sunroom and saw a metal thing on each end that looked something like an inverted, five-pronged pitchfork. Aha! I walked around the corner and bought some rope for 50 cents US, then tied it up there to make a clothesline.

In the corner, on the floor, was a metal, pronged thing that I'd originally thought was a barbecue tong. Which made no sense, as nobody would barbecue there. Not so. It's for grabbing hangers and slapping those wet clothes up onto the line.

And that's something else I missed when I was in Hong Kong. I'm a builder and a handyman, a totally useless skill in Hong Kong. Now if we'd moved in here after the holiday, that line would've been ready for us. But it wouldn't have been nearly as much fun.

I'm a celebrity here, by the way. I go out and walk for about an hour every day, partly to shop and partly just to see the place. People regularly yell at me. "Hello!" One shoeshine man yelled "Hello! You are very cute!" Soon after, I let him shine my boots.

Is it my hair, which is a bit long and therefore curly? Is it my new beard, which is red? Or is it just that I'm a Westerner, and there aren't a whole lot of us here? Probably all of that.

When my wife and I go out together, it's a toss-up who's more worthy of stares. I've got this hair, and I'm taller than most southern Chinese. My wife is tall and blondish, with broad shoulders and lots of freckles. We're a traveling freak show.

I often see people riding their bicycles without looking at where they are going because I'm more interesting to look at. One person actually stopped and stared. And when my wife and I were standing on the sidewalk with the other Western couple, one fellow couldn't help but stare at us, his head at a 135-degree angle from his body. We all waved at him.

I can't help but wonder what would happen if Big Jim ever came to Hangzhou. That's my daddy. He's 6'4", maybe 280 pounds, almost triangular in shape. Nobody in the world has a chest as big as Daddy, certainly not in Hangzhou. And if they think I've got a hairy face, they ain't seen nuthin' yet. Probably bicycles would be crashing all over the place. Maybe even a car or two.

I've been teaching for a week. The kids are wonderful. Okay, not kids--this is tertiary education. But I'm gonna call them kids anyway, and I mean it in a nice way. We're still getting to know each other, of course, so it's too soon to write about them. But I'm loving it.

My wife, needless to say, is doing just fine. She's teaching. That's what she does. She's been doing it for fifteen years, I think. She spent three of those in Hong Kong, but really that's not teaching. That's rote memorization and regurgitation for exams. Here in Hangzhou, we teach. I'm also learning.

So it's possible I'll write about my students next month. It's even possible that they'll all meet Picasso.

I've also seen that they have basketball courts, and I bought a basketball. No doubt I'll join my kids for a game and tell them that I went to school with Michael Jordan. It's the truth. However, I guarantee you that I will not slam-dunk.

## Chapter Two

### Settling In

In the two years I lived in Hong Kong, I can count the number of spontaneous conversations I had on one hand. Let's contrast that with Hangzhou.

On day three, I was at the Internet cafe when someone asked me to translate a word for him. The word was drain, the context that Enron drained some folks' savings. This led to a fifteen-minute conversation.

My new friend is named Jack. He graduated from the school where I will be teaching, and now weaves silk. (The place where I teach offers many majors, and fashion design is one of them. It was formerly known as Silk University.)

Jack has great respect for teachers. They engineer the human mind. His sister is a teacher. Even though I introduced myself as Michael, he insisted on calling me Mr. Michael.

On day four, my wife and I were walking around West Lake. Very beautiful and relaxing and peaceful, but we chose a bad day. A cold winter day. This was destined to be a short visit.

As we were taking photos of each other before searching out a taxi, a man on a bicycle offered to take our photo together. After that, we revised his resume, which was in English. Then we were treated to a long conversation about Hangzhou job opportunities, immigration, changes, the fact that he's unemployed, how hard it is to move to America ("Uncle Sam") or Australia, and the fact that he misses Mao.

Day six, I was at the Internet cafe again when Echo introduced himself. He is a current student where I teach. He's a fashion major, but my first three months or so will be spent teaching English majors, so I won't teach him. Nonetheless, he offered to help me find my way around Hangzhou if I ever need him. Name, phone number, email address. He also recommended a website that could be useful.

Unlike Jack, who was reading his email and some news headlines on Excite, Echo was shopping for electric guitars.

Why was I at an Internet cafe? I ordered my broadband, something I was too cheap to spring for in Hong Kong, but they needed about a week to run the cable. Normally it would be faster, but let's not forget that I arrived during the most important holiday season in China. So, for 2 yuan (US 25 cents) an hour, I hang out at the Internet cafe.

I suppose I could ask my Western colleagues friends to show me the computer room, but I just don't feel like it. The lady running the Internet cafe is very nice. She watches TV, sleeps on her desk, cooks... If customers show up, fine. If not, fine. She's just hanging out, much like everyone else who's staying home for the holidays.

Besides, if I used the computer room, I wouldn't have this chance to meet my students before the school year begins.

## **Chapter Three**

# **Taking To The Streets**

I needed a big nut.

The metal kind, not the edible kind.

Now how does one get that in Hangzhou?

I'd been carrying it in the back of my mind. Get a big nut. This was because I wasn't paying attention when I brought about half of the cat's scratching post. To hook it all together, I needed a nut because the bolthole wasn't threaded.

I was walking home one night, past a fellow I'd seen daily, when I finally realized what his job was. I knew he wasn't a shoeshine man--no equipment for it--but beyond that I was clueless.

As I passed, he was unrolling a cloth full of old nuts and bolts to repair a passing bicycle. He had a water tub, a tire repair kit, and a bicycle pump I hadn't noticed before.

I rushed home, grabbed the part of the scratching post with the bolt in it, and rushed out to him. We spent about fifteen minutes trying to find the right nut. We got the size right, but not the threads. I guess I provided him with some entertainment.

As he studied the post, I said mao. That's Mandarin for cat. Then I mimed scratching motions. He nodded as if to say, "I knew that."

The next day, I carried my piece of scratching post to the store up the road, which I knew sold new bicycles. Then I tried and failed again. They had the size, but not the threads.

Back in the US, it wouldn't be a problem. Find a hardware store. Screws and nuts come in various sizes and thread types. Some are more standard than others, but all are available. Certain types are common on bicycles, other types on something else, etc.

So in Hangzhou, I knew bicycle shops weren't the answer. I hadn't seen a hardware store yet. That could be because they were closed for the holidays--many shops were--or it could be that they just weren't where I'd been walking. I didn't know. And if they did have what I wanted, could I communicate this? I didn't know.

So I continued my walking tour, trying to think of other ways to approach the problem. Thinking on how to make it work without a nut, in other words. Just in case.

I walked down a road I'd never walked down before, simply because I had never walked down it before. There wasn't much to see at all. However, I did pass an electronics guy. Back when I was a tech school student, I used to buy broken radios for a dollar and mine them for component parts. I could fix or build just about anything in those days. This man, I could see, was of a similar bent.

The light bulb went off in my head. A fellow scavenger might have what I need. Not only did he have it, but he made sure I wanted one and not two, and he refused to let me pay him. His location is etched in my mind, as I don't doubt I'll see him again.