

# The Messenger

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Volume 2006  
Issue 1 *The Messenger*, 2006

Article 41

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2006

## Beijing

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### Recommended Citation

Tran, Mai-Anh (2006) "Beijing," *The Messenger*: Vol. 2006: Iss. 1, Article 41.  
Available at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/messenger/vol2006/iss1/41>

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## Beijing

It is hot, and humid. To walk is to claw your way along, to fight against the pulsing currents of relentless heat and the little voice that wants you to go to your home not home yes home, to sleep the torpid day away in the comfort of a hard mattress and a flimsy pillow, of two thin sheets and the privileged iceberg of your room's air conditioning, dreaming of frosty winter nights filled with glistening snow.

But the sky is an insolent blue unflecked with white, pristine in the background of the pounding sun, the only glistening you can see is the sweat shining on everyone's faces and all around you there is life, whirling you away in an eddy of frenzied activity.

So you stay. And you watch.

Your mind whirls with the impossibility of the energy being expended everywhere you look. Provincial is what it's not. Cell phones bicycles taxis lights and restaurants and trendy shops. The only reason your heartbeat is audible is because of that languid heat, and you wonder why the crowds around you are even capable of movement. Why's that? Are you too spoiled, too frail, too broken by your luxuries, too dare I say Westernized, too *lao wai lai le!*, too this or that or the other? Or is it something simpler, more biological, *maybe I just don't like the heat*, is that why you wonder why even the dust swirling around your feet is more alive than you feel?

By rights that irreverent dust should be baked into solid ground by the oppressive temperature, resting dutifully under the hundreds of bicycles that line the streets, demurely offering itself to the leaden pattern of your steps. It shouldn't be dancing around you and everything you see, caking your pants shoes socks if you have them with the stubborn residue of its joy, on no account should something as simple as *dust, man, dust* be so vital, so omnipresent, so perversity of the inanimate, so making you cough like a cigarette-stoked crack furnace living on the streets.

That was probably politically incorrect.

It's absurd, the way something simple like dust or heat spirits you off into poetic excess here. Is it here, or is it you, or is it something else that you haven't figured out yet? Maybe you're overanalyzing or maybe not enough--and anyway, what does it matter? Aren't your thoughts your own, or have you been in school so long they've claimed even that, your ability to have a thought without justification, an opinion without argument?

It's something other than conscious thought that leads you to follow the rest of your flock of temporary expatriates, your feet mechanically echoing theirs down this street and past the next, and comprehending their conversation is out of the question. They're speaking in English, but it doesn't matter, the knot of voices is just as hard to unravel as its Mandarin analogues surrounding the group on all sides—you don't understand them because right now, right at this moment, you're sick of language of any breed, of words that continually cloud their subjects, doing nothing but adding ten pounds and stepping back, hoping that you're proud of them. Even the ostensibly familiar is foreign to you, and you'd give an arm, a leg, whatever it takes, *anything* to hear or see something that even hints at the sort of connections you made when you were too young to put words to them, *something* that would remind you of home, or even that you had a home or even that the feeling of home had ever existed in your mind.

You've all been out too long, seeing this and eating there and buying that, and before you know it the skies have darkened. No, it's not quite night yet; it's time for the daily downpour and you all have anywhere from two to five minutes fewer than you think you do to get under cover damn quick before the heavens open up and drown the world.

*Run.*

It's too late, of course. It almost always is, anyway, but your group continues the mad dash for several minutes before resigning themselves to their drenched and muddy fate—so that's what the dust's master plan has been all along, sneaky bastard.

They're so regular you probably *could* set your watch to them, always right on the cusp between day and night, although there are the occasional tardies that dawdle and only stroll up when you're safely inside watching the light show through the gigantic window on the fifth floor of your dorm/hotel. Nothing too shabby, either, no matter when it is that they come; they always go all out, torrential affairs of wind and water and lightning and booming, crashing thunder shaking your world the hell up. It's amazing to watch; slightly less or more amazing to be in, depending on just how irritated you are by soaking wet clothes, mostly a matter of whether or not you've been caught out several times too many and actually have anything dry to change into when you slide back into the safety of your room (usually about ten seconds before the storms abruptly turn their backs and saunter away, whistling innocently. This is the way it always happens; it's the rule). Either way, you've never felt so alive.

You vaguely figure that Beijing is too far north (and the storms are too short) to really call this daily/nightly event the monsoon, but you're not sure. Just to be on the safe side, you label it a regional peculiarity and leave it at that. Then you *take off those wet clothes before you get pneumonia!* because you're a good kid *at heart anyway* even if your parents aren't there, wring them out and beat your pants against the wall in the hopes that at least some of that omnipresent dust/mud will be scared off. The less laundry you actually need to do, the better. Like the process of getting internet in your room, doing laundry here is a mystic rite that requires various bureaucratic minutiae, three dead chickens and worst of all, walking between buildings.

Just when you've decided to be a proper little student and sit down to do your homework in your pajamas, you get the call.

You've never changed clothes so many times a day in your life and technically you don't have to, it's not like they'll notice or care whether you go or what you wear, pajamas or no, but it's not like this particular group is going to get together and go clubbing again once you all return and remember that there are other people in your respective lives that speak the same language you do. Besides, you've only been inside for an hour,

and after the excitement of the storm *boom crash splash whoosh pow!* like *old-school Batman effects* it seems only natural (well, actually, just lying around after that is a tremendous letdown). Even if you don't go out, you're likely to spend time in friends' rooms, talking playing cards watching TV teasing the girl that heard Yao Ming was in town and wants to go clubbing *maybe we'll see Yao! Oh yeah great idea of course we'll just randomly run into him at the cheap club, yup, that makes perfect sense.*

Going out to the clubs means Wu Dao Kou, screw the fancier areas. The exchange is overwhelmingly in your favor, but shimmied-up packed seas of people with cover fees, expensive alcohol and employees that sneer and peremptorily command you not to use the chair just to tie your *shoe, man, what is your problem?* aren't really all that appealing. Especially not when the alternative is a cozy club/bar that you've all practically owned since the second weekend, a place with no cover fee, nearly free shots of watered-down vodka and tequila and, when it gets late enough, a sidewalk lined with taxis and vendors of street meat (the edible *well mostly* kind, not the human kind); if you're all feeling fancy, you might migrate during the night to the slightly less sketchy joint almost next door.

But almost every night starts here. You all like the cheap little hole in the wall (or floor, as it may be; basement clubs save space) bartenders and patrons who'll chat with you, treat you like family *okay, maybe a particularly dysfunctional family, but isn't that the norm these days?* and drunkenly grope you (or rather, your friends; it's particularly amusing because they're guys, and feel intensely betrayed). It's worth the occasional fleshy slutty amateur English teacher that comes around every night because she had her eye on one of you and none of you have found the right, the absolutely *perfect oh man I can't wait to see her face* moment to let her know that said one has since taken up with a particularly long-legged specimen-member of the bevy of Korean girls. It's not very nice and in a way you feel sort of bad for her but *holy shit is it worth it* when he and the Korean finally come to the club with you several weekends later. You feel a little of your humanity draining away as you ponder whether to pat her on the back and say "next time, crazy stalker woman" or just surrender to your meaner impulses and point and laugh.

But all that's hindsight for the future at this point; right now you're trying to figure out who's going in which cab and if the girls that claim they wanted to go and will complain and complain if you leave them behind or if they think you were thinking about leaving them behind will actually show up this time. It's not far; the ride's almost always just ten kuai (unless you run across a driver who claims he has no idea where that part of the city is *yeah right damn money-gouger*), so it really doesn't matter that much whether you grab a 1.20 cab or a 1.60 one, but damn it if you don't try for the cheaper option anyway.

As you climb inside, you can't help but notice that in the what, maybe two or three hours since the deluge the streets are already trying to pretend that nothing happened *storm, what storm? Hahaha there isn't a puddle in sight, or won't be soon if we have anything to say about it*. At least that insouciant dust is laid low for now, slowly reconstituting itself from the patches of mud here and there.

Choose from any number of different incredibly inappropriate and/or random conversations that you have on the way there, enabled not so much by the fact that the cab driver doesn't speak English as by the fact that you're all more or less giddily hyperactive with the anticipation of actually *doing something*. Your incoherent dialogues here, foreshadowing their drunken descendants, will, like their spiraling children, always be hilarious to you, though none of them will make much sense afterwards, or seem interesting in the slightest to anyone you ramble on about it to secondhand—and, sometimes, not even to you. Ah, the burdens you must bear.

Before you quite manage to come to your senses, there's the bridge/overpass/you've never paid enough attention, which is another way of saying, "you're there." You've come to party, but for the 8-second walk from the cab to the club, watch your pockets and steel your heart because the beggars have come out, and they scent bloooood. Foreign blood, which as everyone knows is green and crinkly, although here the money looks like rainbow spit and...well, okay, it's still crinkly. And they want it, oh yes they do.

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A beggar comes up to you.
> ignore beggar
The beggar comes closer.
> inch away
Even closer.
> say "mei you"
The beggar backs away mournfully.  You are sad, but not that sad.
A flower kid is approaching.
> inventory
You are carrying:
-stylin' clubwear (which is to say, your normal clothes.  Oh come on, didn't you know, everything's in when you're from not-here or is it that you just don't care?)
-shoes
-10 kuai in one pocket (cab fare for the way back)
-100 kuai in the other pocket (to blow on cheap shots for everyone)
> ignore flower kid
The flower kid comes up to you and makes big innocent possibly drug-induced flower-kiddy eyes at you.
> back away
You bump into the beggar.  The beggar asks you for money.
> say "mei you"
The susceptible girl in your group (there's always at least one) breaks down and gives the beggar some money.
> grab susceptible girl, dive into sanctuary of club_

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You have escaped.

For now, of course. Although in this case it isn't quite that exciting; these street beggars really aren't as bad as the hawkers that haunt touristy places. Dealing with those means playing emperor penguin and gathering into a tight huddle even if you don't have anything to talk about, backs to the world, except instead of shivering with cold, you're all dying from the heat, but to move is to break the line and next thing you know someone will have accidentally made eye contact with one of them

and then none of the bu yaos in the world can save you because you are all doomed.

The ones here usually back off fairly quickly, though; it's a bar street in an area where foreign students like to come out and play, so by the end of the night they'll have taken in enough from drunken donations to buy themselves another false leg. Besides, any minute now, another crowd of scandalously-dressed *even by our standards, but most of the girls here pull it off better* clubbers will stroll on by, much more interested in showing off their questionable wealth. These beggars won't starve, not tonight, at least.

They're not what you came here for anyway.

There's no time for this sort of reflection after you enter the door. The place isn't fancy, but that hasn't stopped it from being your group's personal weekend resort. Midway through your stay, you miss a weekend for a group trip that's taken you out of town (*oh, but that's an entirely different story, oh man, I gotta tell you about the time we and the hotel and the*), and the Friday after you return you notice they've managed to spiff the place up a bit, and though you doubt they managed it just from your group's entirely too generous patronage, it's hard not to feel at least a little bit smug—or ashamed, depending on how you feel about it. Either way, they have a little lounge area with nicer chairs and fancier lights and some sort of chain wall affair *yeah I don't get it either*, and that's pretty cool, you guess, though really you just don't care enough to really have an opinion as long as the bar and dance floor stay right where they should be.

Both before and after the change, though, the pattern of the night remains the same, and afterwards all the nights will melt together into a haphazardly spliced-together memory of lights in the dark and vivid blurs of motion and broken bits of conversations pieced together in any way that makes possible sense. They may or may not have all come from the same conversation with the same person, but your hindsight sure as hell doesn't know any better. Each separate night is was sometimes like the same one anyway.



Lights.

Music.

Dancing.

People gyrating mostly-rhythmically in wild approximations of patterns, some drunk on various forms of alcohol, some drunk on energy and life. They look like demented dervishes without the body control. You'd laugh if you weren't right in the middle of them, letting the music move you in any way that feels close to right, half-self-conscious half-fuck-the-world.

Time passes, or you assume it does between dancing and talking and *what else oh yeah* breathing.

Dawn.

The problem with underground clubs is that the illusion of neverending time really is very effective. That and the sun's a tricky little bitch; you could swear that the last time you went up into the pollution-and-star-hazed night was only a few minutes ago, and there's gotta be some reason for the shy glow that greets you now from the horizon when you emerge from the pit of music and people. It's like walking through a baby cloud as you hail one of the crowd of taxis that's been lining the streets *jeez, do these people ever sleep all night long, as far as you can tell.*

Not every night ends this late, and it's a good thing, you think, as you stagger up the multiple flights of stairs to your room *what kind of place turns off its elevators at two in the morning?*, cursing those lucky bastards who get to room on the first or second floors. The adrenaline rush has mostly burned off and your legs get heavier the more you climb; your room's not that high up, but damn if it doesn't feel like it.

If you're unlucky, it's the night before one of the days that you have tai ji quan outside in the morning, early enough so that you've only slept a few hours. Of course, having exerted as much energy as you have, you still feel somewhat rested *or maybe it's just the jetlag oh come on it's been like weeks it can't possibly*, though it isn't as though your brain is on enough to do anything but numbly attempt to process the instructor's commands.

It isn't until you've automated yourself back to your room, changed, picked up your things and are on your way across the drowsy campus to class that you realize it's morning in any other sense than an *oh gods what kind of time d'you call this anyway?* one. It can be foggy in the mornings, and still slightly cool *for now*, though the humidity's bac and you're already sticking to your clothes. You look down, trying not to think about it, and catch sight of the sparkling dew that adorns everything you see.

By the time you finish classes at noon, it's all gone, and the pretense of slight cool has vanished as though it never was, lost in a haze of bicycle girls and drink vendors on the horizon.

It is hot, and humid.

[*Mai-Anb Tran*]