

## One for the memoirs (5:15 to 5:45 am, 8/13/2007)

I had a bad feeling as I walked down the dark deserted streets of Aba at just after 5:00 am in the morning, and I remember thinking if I was going to get mugged this could be the time; not unheard of in the improvised knife wielding areas of Tibet. The new bus station had been inconveniently placed on the outskirts of town a 30 minute walk from where I was staying, and my bus to Hongyuan was leaving at the less than ideal hour of 6:00 am. I had intended on taking a cab, but I left with enough time in case I had to walk the whole way. When I left my hotel at around 5:15 there was neither a soul, nor cab to be found. By the time the cabs started cruising the streets it was about 5:30 and I was more than half way to my destination. My initial trepidation had subsided as my walk thus far had been uneventful so I decided to just walk the rest of the way. Of course you always feel safe until something happens.

I had one last stretch to cross, a portion of the road just before the station that had been torn up for road construction. All traffic was diverted around it, but there was a walking path through the construction zone which lasted about 200 m. I was about half way through the construction zone with the lights of the bus station off in the distance when someone approached from behind. I was a little nervous at first slightly quickening my pace, but the figure caught up to me and began to ask the standard questions, speaking a bit of English, "Where are you from? Where are you going? ect." He was a young male possible as young as in his late teens or as old as mid twenties. I have never been very good at guessing ages and even less so with Asians. Initially I actually felt a little more at ease having someone walking with me. He said he was going to Chengdu, and then he said he wanted to go to Nepal and then India. At this point he began grabbing at my flashlight. Having already lost a flashlight on this trip, and now with my newly acquired one, hand derived by my cousin, I wasn't really in a mode to give it up. He kept insisting at this point he drew a long knife or what you might call a short sword, a rather thick blade maybe 15 inches in length. I still had not realized what was going on at the moment and thought he was just showing me his sword, for lack of a better word. But his tone changed and he motioned that he would hit me with so I gave him the flashlight, which didn't really satisfy him much as he immediately asked for money. Apparently he wanted me to finance his journey to India, and it was this point I realized I was being mugged. Weighted down with my bags, my big backpack on my back and small one my chest containing my camera equipment; I wasn't in a position to out run my assailant. However, I took a few rapid steps in meager attempt but not really wanting to turn my head from the weapon wielding attacker and risk a blow from behind.

The sword didn't appear to be too sharp but a blow to the head could do a lot of damage. I gave him the money that was in my wallet, the Chinese equivalent of maybe five dollars. He wasn't satisfied, clearly he wasn't going to be bought off with chump change and he asked for hundreds (of Yuan). I gave him 200 Yuan the equivalent of a little less than \$28. But this wasn't satisfying him either and having gotten some money he became greedier. Now asking for American dollars, which I lied and told him I didn't have, he eventually then pointed at my bag that was holding my camera equipment, not that he knew that. I was trying to negotiate with him telling him that 200 RMB (abbreviation for Chinese Yuan) was enough. Now I'm no expert on negotiation but it is very difficult to negotiate when the other party is the only one with a weapon. While my pulse was certainly racing I was, in retrospect, surprised how I was rationally analyzing the situation. I had determined, first while heavy and metal the sword was not very sharp, the main thing I had to worry about was a head blow. Secondly, he did not appear to be an expert at handling it by the way he was some what wildly brandishing it about. Thirdly, he had ample opportunities to strike me in the head and take everything but had not, leading me to believe he really didn't want to hurt me. Fourthly, he was smaller than me, coming up to maybe my nose, and of course weighed a lot less. Finally I was not sure when or if he would be satisfied and I wasn't about to hand over \$6000 worth of camera equipment to some metal wielding armature hour kid.

Now there are several situations in which I would not have attempted the following action, I've seen many large Tibetan men who certainly new how to handle a knife had my assailant been on of these, the

altercation would no doubt ended much differently, namely with me handing over as much money as would satisfy him. As I pleaded with him I noticed he was holding the sword out in front of him with one hand so that he really could not land any kind of a forceful blow quickly. In mid sentence I seized the opportunity and made a grab for the handle. Now I haven't lifted weights regularly in over 8 years but I don't think I've ever been stronger than when I clutched the handle of that sword. I fairly quickly over powered him and had the blade at his face. One thing I hadn't noticed was that the sword was tied to his wrist so I could not get it out of his hand without doing some real damage like breaking his wrist, which I probably could have, but despite him trying to take all of my money, I really did not want to hurt the guy. My new negotiating position, blade in his face, was much more effective and I told him to take the 200 RMB and go. He said several times I go, I go. Now why I trusted him after he just tried to mug me I'm not really sure. Again in retrospect this may not have been a good gamble, but I figured having just been bested he would not attack given that there was a doubt of success even when he had the weapon. I released the sword and quickly ran towards the bus station keeping an eye on the attacker. This time he did not follow but made some aggressive noises and brandished the sword like a cocked baseball bat. I reached the safety of the station, minus 200 RMB and my flashlight, with a few minor cuts on my hand, and one fairly exciting story tell. I'm often asked, "Have you ever been in any scary or dicey situations?" to which I have always replied, "Not really" well I think this qualifies. But now that I've got one I don't need another.