

# Trek Across China to Tibet

by Joseph Redman "Fungus"



Jan "Ms. Skete" and Joseph "Fungus" Redman and Panda

May 3rd, 2004 Los Angeles International Airport:

First there were just a few, then a few more, then more than just a few! Clowns arrived from all over the country, ready for an adventure to China and Tibet. Some flew from the USA, some from Europe, some from Russia, some from Japan, and when we were all collected in the Shanghai airport ready for the adventure, we were over 50 in number, representing 14 different countries! (USA, Holland, Denmark, England, Japan, China, Russia, Mexico, Chili, Germany, Belgium, Canada, Scotland, & Italy) Our troupe included medical professionals, teachers, business people, students, employed and unemployed, and an eight year old named Lili, our youngest and bravest clown. Our goal was to share love and laughter and play and a sense of passion for all humanity with everyone we met. We were more than successful. Masha Boyarskaya from Russia & India Chang from Denmark (& China) were our guides from MIR Travel. Tony Tongzhou was our representative and guide from the Chinese government.

Following the lead of Patch Adams and several nasal diplomats from the Gesundheit! Institute, we loaded our tour buses and began our journey by bus, boat and plane through Hangzhou, Thousand Islands Laks/Tunxi, Huangshan, He Fei, & Chengdu in China. We then flew to Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. Our return took us from Lhasa through Chengdu, to Beijing, then we went our separate ways across the globe.

There were so many stories of love and play and compassion during the adventure. We visited schools, homes for the elderly, schools for both deaf and blind children, parks, orphanages,

villages (some of whom had never seen Westerners or clowns before!) and the streets and shops of many villages.

Some of our clowns were musicians, and everywhere we went we gathered crowds of hundreds of curious onlookers who ended up being pulled into the streets for impromptu dancing and play! More than once we were politely asked by the police to move so traffic could get through an intersection.

## Snapshots of China

There were many highlights during our long days of silliness in addition to the instant loving relationships we developed with patients, children, and the elderly. On one occasion we visited a 15th century nobleman's home, now an art museum for the village. We were escorted inside and started playing music and dancing, but very few of the villagers followed us inside. Patch asked a few questions of our guide and discovered most of the villagers could not afford the entry fee into the museum, so stood outside waiting for us to exit. Patch instantly recruited "pullers" and we pulled dozens of hesitant villagers into the museum. For most, it was their first time inside their own museum! The building rang with music and laughter!

In Chengdu we visited the Panda Research Center for China and several had the opportunity to hold a baby panda for a touching photo opportunity. [See photo at left, Patch Adams and baby panda below.



In Tibet, we toured Potala Palace, the home of the Dalai Lama. Throughout Lhasa, the capital city of Tibet, we noticed hundreds of Chinese soldiers and more than once traveled past convoys of troops and ammunition. When we asked Toni why there were so many troops in Tibet, his reply was simply, "To protect the people." Hmm - from an attack by the Dalai Lama? We believe we were the first clowns to visit Tibet - yippee - we made history!



*What did the trickster (Patch) say to the Tibetan Monk, who is wearing Patch's clown nose and contemplating Patch's duck hat?*



*Fabian Cordua from Germany in nursing home*



*Connie Coble-Roe at School for the Deaf*

While in Tibet we played with monks at the Sera monastery, clowned with the people at the town square, and were served yak-butter tea by the children at the SOS Children's Village. One very special morning was at the village school in MoZhuGongGa County, several miles outside of Lhasa. When we stepped off our bus and walked into the school playground, 100 uniformed children waited in silence, seated on long pieces of what appeared to be unused road construction sections of concrete. Within a few minutes complete chaos ensued as we ran, hopped, hugged, tickled, laughed, and danced with these precious children.

We entered the nursing home through small restful gardens and curved walkways. Many clowns followed the guides into a large meeting room filled with residents.. Fungus slipped off into a side ward staffed with three nurses. There were approximately 16 beds tucked neatly into what could have passed for mini-cubicles in an office. The walls were concrete painted white. Fungus sat in a chair across from a gentleman Fungus estimated to be in his eighties. Either from disease or injury, his right eye was blind. His right arm and leg were motionless and he had the appearance of one who suffered damage from a stroke. His one eye twinkled when Fungus walked in and he smiled this great big semi-toothed smile! Fungus gave him a hug, held his hands for a moment, then we began what turned into a long game of balloon volleyball. Fungus isn't real coordinated and often had to get up and run across the room to catch the balloon, much to the delight of this gentleman and the staff. After about fifteen minutes he indicated he was tired, so Fungus gave him another hug and we rested. Then the man reached to the small table beside his chair and carefully pulled two cookies from a small plastic container and handed them to me. Earlier on the trip some of the clowns expressed their concern about eating food they were offered from the Chinese. Having read a few books on the Chinese culture and their customs, Fungus know that the offer of any food was considered a high honor. Fungus eats anything from any source, so we laughed and ate our cookies together. As the clowns were gathered up to return to the buses, Fungus leaned over and kissed his new friend and shook his hand, then clumsily backed out of the room. The elderly man waved and laughed and smiled with the twinkle in his eye.

During a visit to an elementary school Fungus stuffed a balloon under his red shirt and walked around telling children it was his baby. Most of the young teenagers spoke English, and they would pat the balloon and ask Fungus if it was a boy or a girl. Knowing the Chinese government still had some restrictions on the number of children a couple can have, Fungus would put his thinking face on and reply, "One boy and one girl – two babies! Oh, wait! This is China. One baby!" Each time the children would laugh and laugh and laugh. During our morning visit several clowns painted the faces of some of the children. Later that same day, as we were waiting in 5:00 p.m. traffic at a red light, Fungus looked down and saw a little girl on the back of her father's motorcycle. She had face paint and a balloon and when she looked up at the bus, she beat her father on the back and pointed and they both laughed and waved.

At a Ming dynasty village we exploded onto a street and within minutes were surrounded by shoppers, bicyclists, children, adults, dogs, and the ever present police. While the clown musicians entertained the crowd, Fungus was approached by a little old lady. She gently took his hand, led him into the street, and began a slow, elegant dance. Fungus had seen similar dances in travelogues about the formal stage dancers during the tenure of Mao. For ten minutes Fungus mirrored the foot, hand, and arm movements of this gracious elderly lady. She finished the dance with the traditional salute. Following the dance she hugged Fungus and gave him two thumbs up!

We stepped off the busses and walked toward a six-story building. Fungus was one of the first clowns to step onto the porch and was immediately snagged by a small elderly lady. She hooked her arm in Fungus's and sat him down on a chair beside her. Fungus kissed her and held on tight! As the clowns moved into the building Fungus reached into his clown bag and pulled out a small "beetle-bug" massager. (A gift from Shobi!) He moved behind his newly adopted grandmother and began massaging her shoulders. Fungus was glad he put in new batteries! For the next twenty minutes shoulder massages were given to dozens of the residents who waited politely in line for their massage. There were startled jumps, giggles, hoots, smiles, and sounds bordering on something close to sexual! Fungus has never experienced so many smile and hugs within such a short time frame. After all the massages were complete, Fungus and his adopted grandmother stood up and dances to a violin serenade provided by Jawknee. It was lovely, elegant, and filled with joy and love.

At the SOS orphanage in Tibet, Fungus and Miss Skete and a few other clowns were escorted on a tour of the children's homes. About the size of a "normal" American two-bedroom house, the homes had two large bedrooms, one on each end of the home. One was for six girls and the other for six boys. The center of the home consisted of a living room, kitchen, and laundry. As we entered the living room, all the children were present along with their "mothers." These were single women who were called mother by the children. The mothers were devoted to the children and were not allowed to date during their tenure with the orphanage. At each of the three homes we were privileged to visit, we were served snacks of either cookies or candies by the children. Fungus had read that one of the Tibetan drinks that had to be tried during a visit to Tibet was something called yak butter tea. The clowns were given small cups filled with the hot brew and we drank politely and smiled and patted our tummies and told the children that is was so good and we thanked them so much for sharing it with us. The tea seemed to be a basic green tea brewed with very hot water, then topped off with melted yak butter. Quite bitter!!! But, Fungus still felt very honored at the presentation of the food and drink.

– Joseph Redman "Fungus" form Waco, Texas

## Snapshots from Lucy Sheffield

of Haddonfield New Jersey



One day our group was scheduled to do street clowning but since it was raining hard we weren't sure what to do when our bus let us off in a small rural town. What happened was that some of the townspeople found a wonderful indoor auditorium and made it quickly known to the residents of the town that "The Clowns are Here!" We had a tremendously enthusiastic group of adults and kids and clowns at this impromptu event.

What I will never forget is our clown group walking through a crowded market in Lhasa, with Patch wearing baggy pants filled with balloons bumping into throngs of onlookers like a bumper car. And the Chinese people... playful, curious, and quick to smile and laugh. (Pictured at left)

And so my clowning grows. Learning from everyone as well as myself. Realizing that some of the clowns with bigger more overt styles open doors to make it easier for a more subtle quieter clown like me to try braver and more outrageous things.

My red nose helps me engage others and helps us all feel more fully human and joyful. It had been said (Mark Olsen) that the clown nose is the smallest mask. Just think, a small mask enabling me to feel more human.

– Lucy Sheffield

Photos on these pages from Lucy Sheffield and Connie Coble-Roe

