



Source: AFP, 'Iran hunts N-bomb technology', *The Australian online*, 05/01/06.

Tags: [food](#), [dreams](#), [travel](#)

Writer/s: [Ellen Zweig](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

Arriving at the airport in Pudong, I make my way through customs in the fog of jet lag and little sleep. My suitcase barely makes it out the door. It's bursting at the seams, packed beyond its capacity. When I get to the Donghu Hotel, I insist on carrying the suitcase up to the room myself. Safely inside, I open the case and all of the rice floods out. An explosion or a waterfall. Rice cascades down the sides of the case and onto the bed, over the side of the bed and onto the floor. I'm bringing rice to China; like coals to Newcastle.

This job is getting on my nerves. I begin to scoop up the rice and funnel it back into the suitcase until it's full again. Even then, there's rice on the bed and the floor, but I close the case and wait for the phone call from my contact. As I wait, I doze.

When the phone rings, I wake from scattered dreams. I was explaining in halting Chinese that although it looked like my suitcase was filled with tea, it was really filled with rice. The voice on the other end of the line said that they wanted raw rice and I had brought cooked rice. Didn't I know that rice expands when it's cooked? Again, I explained that although it looked like my suitcase was filled with rocks, it was really filled with water. The voice on the other end of the line said that they wanted dry sand, not wet sand. Didn't I know that wet sand became hard and impossible to use? Yet again, I explained that although it looked like my suitcase was filled with ceramic bowls, it was really filled with people. The voice laughed. 'Impossible. You can only fit parts of a person in a suitcase that size, and, in any case, we wanted you to bring coals.'

'Wei,' I said, which is how you answer a phone in Chinese.

We arrange a meeting and I decide it's time for a long hot shower. Of course, this is China, so the water becomes cold after about five minutes. After the shower, I feel revived. I dress in my best clothes and go out with my suitcase.

We meet in a shopping mall on Huaihai Avenue. One of those new, expensive places that showcase international designer fashions. He's a non-descript Chinese man, average age, average height and weight. I would never recognize him again. He's part of a network of traders who deal in absurd commodities. We bring rice to China, diamonds to South Africa, poppies to Afghanistan, vodka to Russia. You name it, we can get it. But it has to be superfluous. If we bring a commodity somewhere, it tips the balance. It's too much, too often, too early. We add something that no one needs and we take something else.

The man hands me a suitcase filled with corn. I have two nights in Shanghai and then I'll take the corn back to the Midwest, somewhere in Iowa, where the corn fields are already overflowing with mature corn plants, the corncobs heavy on the stalks. I would rather have taken wine to Bordeaux or olives to Marseilles, but you can't choose your next destination. Perhaps in Iowa City, someone will hand me a suitcase that will take me somewhere I really want to go.

Meanwhile, I have two days in Shanghai and a suitcase full of corn. I leave the shopping mall, looking for a good meal and a good night's sleep.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ellen Zweig.*