

Translated excerpt

Wolfgang Korn / Birgit Jansen
Lauf um dein Leben. Die Weltreise der Sneakers

Carl Hanser Verlag, München 2019,
ISBN 978-3-446-26217-1

S. 5-8 & 22-38

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Run for Your Life: The Sneakers' Tour around the World

Translated by Zaia Alexander



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((Introduction)) How a pair of sneakers turned couch potato's life upside down

S-N-E-E-A-K-E-R-S – to this very day, I thought they were nothing more than just some pimped out sports shoes that people took way too seriously.

Right, so anyway, sneakers were basically just modern gym shoes with thick rubber soles and miles of laces. But “gym shoes” always reminded me of cold gyms, locker rooms that reeked of sweat, and a P.E. class that I never failed to fail at. And now, I, of all people, was supposed to write something about a pair of worn out sneakers that had fallen off some guy's feet during a marathon?

When my boss insisted that I should do the story, I thought: Okay, so what have I go to do this afternoon anyway? I had no idea at the time that this story about a pair of old sports shoes would keep me busy for several months and take me halfway around the world.

In fact, I got to know a completely different side of the world - one that was not in any travel guide. And I met people in Europe, Asia and Africa who you don't normally meet on sightseeing tours.

I certainly hadn't expected that this story would rob me of my sleep and my "innocence." Yes, that's the name for it, innocence. Because I - Werner Koschinski, a journalist for the last twenty-five years - have gained an entirely new understanding of myself, the world, and humanity as a result of this story.

If it wouldn't sound like a stupid Hollywood movie, I'd actually put it this way: This story has changed my life. But that's truly the case.

The evidence:

1. I jog now. Well, okay, not exactly "jogging," It's more "power walking." But I'm faster than a couple of lame joggers. And if you know me, you know what a drastic change that is for me. I'm anything but a sports fan. Until then, the only sports I liked were playing pool and watching soccer in my favorite pub.

2. I take care of my running sneakers. Anybody who knows how I otherwise handle my clothes, might have an idea of the revolution that has occurred in my life.

But it gets even worse:

3) I, the overworked reporter, who never lifted a finger in my spare time, now do volunteer work, i.e. without pay, with a start-up company based in Ethiopia that produces handmade sneakers – tailor made and yet they are not more expensive than so-called branded products.

This enormous upheaval began with a pair of sneakers, custom-made, and there were only two models in the entire world. One pair was defective, the other was still intact and therefore very, very valuable - but we didn't know where it was.

It's almost unbelievable how the search for these sports shoes took me around the world: through the Chinese metropolis of Wenzhou with its millions of people, or through East Africa in search of a particular shoemaker.

But I have to tell the story from the very beginning. And the whole story, not just the reportage version for our newspaper, which solely revolved around the sneakers. No, it's about people and their urge to move - and it goes much further than a marathon run of over 26,200 miles.

Strictly speaking, none of this would have happened, had we simply written a normal report about our hometown's annual marathon race.

But the boss absolutely wanted something very special.

Well, that's exactly what he got.

Chapter 2

- Who bled to death in their sneakers?
- Has anybody made it to the finish line barefoot?
- Who ran naked and got overlooked by our photographer?

Since none of the runners scored a record and no extraordinary events occurred during the marathon, the other media outlets wanted to get in on the act of our sneakers.

It was starting to look as if the story could turn into a media hype.

What is a hype and what is a media hype?

Why are young men suddenly growing full beards again, when for the longest time they were considered totally uncool? Why, when there are literally of hundreds of books about witches and wizards, do all the kids only want to read the newest Harry Potter book?

When suddenly a lot of people in a cultural space desire a certain product, or adopt the same behavior, we're talking about hype. Young people are particularly susceptible to this.

When mass media such as newspapers, radio and TV from around the world report about an Australian dog that had been abandoned and then found his way back home 300 miles away, we're talking about media hype.

The term comes from English. As a verb "to hype" means: to inflate, acclaim, make a fuss about something. But also: to trick somebody! As a noun "hype" means: stimulate, excite, advertise.

In the beginning, spectacular news reports, catchy commercials, or a mixture of both were circulated by an advertising agency to promote a star or a special brand. Newspapers and television then spread the word. In the meantime, hypes have emerged primarily through social media, whether we are talking about new dance styles, smartphone apps or eating habits.

Whatever it is that suddenly gets the most attention is decided within the networked user groups - the scientists call this avalanche-like proliferation "self-enhancement." Yet the ultimate reason why young people accept an offer and circulate it, or not remains a mystery. That is why hype cannot be guaranteed. Fortunately! Because otherwise the giant corporations and film studios would simply hype every product and every actor.

Aside from that, attention usually bottoms out just as quickly as it has gotten started: "in" is now "out." Very few things experience permanent hype. For decades sneakers has been one of them.

More and more people wanted to talk to the editor-in-chief, but when an old acquaintance from one of the big news magazines in Hamburg called, he answered - in his office. The colleagues listened to his voice getting louder and louder through the open door: "Even if we found something. That's our story! You just want to use other media as a springboard again!"

Unfortunately, he shut the door with his behind. When the boss returned, his face was bright red. Obviously, the colleague from Hamburg wanted to wrangle the story out of him, but he didn't succeed.

"That's the challenge I've always been waiting for," he got right to the point. "This time we're ahead of the game! We're gonna show them what good journalism is. Whatever the cost! Even if it means taking a big, long trip for the story. Get ready, Koschinski. But how do we want to proceed? What angle should we take?"

The sports reporter: "The majority and best runners come from Kenya and Ethiopia."

The business journalist: “Most sneakers come from China.”

The boss: “East Africa or China? We can’t cut our reporter in half. So: China or Africa?”

“Tracing the shoes back to China now that would be something new,” said the sports reporter.

“Right! A lot has already been written about runners. But not about their sports shoes. And most of them come from China,” I add.

The boss ordered me to find out everything I could about the shoes:

- Who put them on the power distribution box? And why did he do that?
- Who designed them and where were they made?
- Is it a special design or are there perhaps more of them?

“Okay! We reporters from the *Mittagskurier* are going to follow the sneaker trail to Shanghai or Goangdong, or wherever else they may be in the empire behind the Great Wall.”

“And if you still have questions about China,” the business editor advised me, “then ask your colleague Kleinschmidt at *Impuls-Geber*. *Impuls-Geber* was the finance magazine published by our publishing company.

Labeling Requirements for Products

Where were the goods we purchase made and what are they made of?

Most people believe that information is supposed to be on the label of the product. In fact, however, neither under German law nor under European Union law is there an obligation to label the products we buy.

In the case of food items, it is indeed compulsory to state the ingredients and the country of origin. However, the industry interprets country of origin as the country in which the last major step in processing took place: if nuts are peeled, roasted and packaged in Bremen, they therefore come from Germany.

As for textiles, on the other hand, it is only mandatory to list the exact composition of the materials - not the additional parts such as buttons or zippers. The same applies to shoes: The

composition of the upper material, lining and outsole must be named. In the case of final production of shoes and clothing outside the EU, however, identifying the country where it was manufactured is still voluntary.

In recent years, the EU Commission has attempted to introduce a labeling law for all products throughout Europe. But once again, the member states were unable to reach an agreement. The Germans, who are so proud of their “Made in Germany,” were also among those who pulled the brakes.

When it comes to composite things such as electrical items (a smartphone, for example), it is of course difficult to say where they come from: The raw materials for a smartphone come from many countries because in addition to plastic, glass, copper and aluminum, so-called rare earths are also needed - these are metals that only exist in Central Africa and China.

That’s why the industry itself reserves the right to determine which country of origin it wants to print on its label. Often it is only the final production of an object whose individual components have been delivered from all over the world.

Conclusion: We don’t really know where our clothes, our shoes, or even our food come from.

May 29, 4:30 p.m., editorial office *Mittagskurier*

I am sitting at my desk in the open-plan office of our editorial office.

The room is called “Newsroom” or “News Desk Room.” Our PC workstations are lined up on two long tables: chop, chop. Only the editor-in-chief and the department heads have their own offices.

What is special about the newsroom, however, are the huge screens attached to the front wall. There you can see the individual pages of the next edition of the newspaper: the respective articles, pictures and headlines appear piece by piece. Everybody can constantly see which articles are already there - and which are not. It’s also kind of like a race ... against the deadline, against the hour everything has to be finished!

On the important “page three”, where my story is supposed to land, there is just a big white hole. I have to get a move on...

The heads of the marathon are stonewalling. “We won’t give any more information until we get the sneakers! You’ve got them - right?”

“No comment!”

So next thing I’ll do is a search on the internet for the sneakers. A few local sneaker shops have a website. One of the owners calls himself the local sneakers expert and includes his e-mail address. I write to him:

W.K. *Mittagskurier*

Need background info on a rare pair of sneakers.

Does anybody have any idea how many different types of sneakers are offered for sale on the Internet? Not hundreds, but thousands ... And that includes only those who sell them brand-new. On top of that, there are endless special editions and collector’s items, some of which are offered for astronomical sums. Damn it, why do they make so many different gym shoes?

After about an hour, and after my right index finger went numb from all the mouse clicks, I had to draw a provisional conclusion: The big labels don’t carry our sneakers – which is exactly what I’d thought from the start.

The sneakers expert answered:

I’m here at the After-Marathon-Party and already drank a bit.

But why don’t you stop by my shop tomorrow morning?

I know everything about Sneakers 😊

The trail to the well-known labels in Germany, Great Britain, USA, Japan and Brazil lead nowhere. However, many manufacturers simultaneously work for expensive brands and for cheap variants, so-called no-name products.

So I have to take a closer look at the producers. Where are all the sneakers manufactured? I have reports in mind that refer to Taiwan, Indonesia and Vietnam. Where to start? It’s time to reach out to our China and business expert Mr. Kleinschmidt!

“I’ve already heard that you need help,” he greets me on the phone. “Most shoes, including sneakers of course, come from China today. Makes sense! Even the big companies manufacture there - in China or Indonesia. The workers there are quick and, above all, cheap.”

“How can I get in touch with them?” I continue.

“Contact with shoe manufacturers in China? Yes, in the past it wasn’t that easy. The Chinese speak very poor English and are able to write it even less! But meanwhile there is an offer of assistance.”

“An offer of assistance?”

“To be precise: the super offer of assistance on the Internet! It is an entire portal devoted to bringing together producers from China with dealers from all over the world. It also has a meaningful name.”

“And what’s it called?”

“A-L-I-B-A-B-A!”

“You mean like *Alibaba and the 40 Thieves*?”

“Exactly, my friend! The only question is: Who is Alibaba in this game, who are the 40 robbers, and who has to work for the treasure? Think about it!”

In fact, Alibaba is a kind of Ebay - only much more comprehensive and especially for professional retailers. When I enter the search term “Sneakers”, I get 5,400 hits. I’ll never get anywhere this way. Which is why I registered with Alibaba, of course as a retailer not as a journalist.

While waiting for the e-mail confirmation, I’ve already started drafting my request:

SNEAKERS WANTED!

LOOKING FOR THIS SNEAKERS SPECIAL EDITION:

(I then upload a picture of the shoes. A picture fairly out of focus - we don’t want anybody else to use this picture!)

WHO HAS PRODUCED IT?

I'LL MAKE A NEW ORDER!

And then comes my contact address (of course not my e-mail address at the editorial office, but the address I always use for dicey research).

SNEAKERS WANTED!

LOOKING FOR THIS SNEAKERS-SPECIAL-EDITION:

Already 7 p.m. and they haven't answered the two most important questions: where exactly the shoes come from and who wore them.

Our photographer has already put a picture of the sneakers in the center of the otherwise empty page three. My text is missing. So the boss is forcing me to write a story that I actually don't want to write at all. Because I simply don't have enough facts. I can barely hint at the fact that we have the sneakers. "They were found at the side of the track ...", that's how I skirt the issue. Our lawyer recommended we word it this way: "Don't admit anything, otherwise a lawyer will be standing at your door tomorrow - with an injunction to hand over the object." That's why I have to do what a journalist shouldn't do. I offer a few hints: "Likely the sneakers had been made in China and were worn by one of the first runners in the starting field." Instead of answers, I offer questions: "Why did a runner throw away his sports shoes? Did he have a replacement or did he prefer to run barefoot?"

And then I just start with a story about runners who ran without shoes, or had worn extraordinary footwear. The most famous case occurred during the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome: the Ethiopian Abebe Bikila crossed the finish line barefoot and won the race. Good sports shoes had been around for a long time, but it was simply a tradition in East Africa to run without shoes. Some sports experts consider running barefoot to be the most important reason why East African runners are the best in the world. They run without shoes from an early age onwards and develop strong feet.

Did our unknown runner want to remind us of this event that had taken place more than fifty years ago? Or did he do it in protest against the big brands that sign only a few runners so that the rest have little chance to become professional runners? But then why the blood? I add this detail at the very end in order to increase the tension and get the reader hyped for the sequel.

The boss is not really satisfied, but I did my job according to all the rules of the art. So the story will be printed with the title: “Battered and Beaten - the other side of the marathon” – even though not a single one of us has any clue how the whole thing was supposed to end.

30 May, 9.30 a.m., Downtown

I’m standing in front of Sneak it!, supposedly the “best sneakers shop in Town.” That said, I found out yesterday on the internet that there are two more shops that make the same exact claim.

I emptied my coffee-to-go a long while ago, by the time a very young man finally walks up and unlocks the front door. I follow him into the shop and when he looks at me, I say: “Uh, I made an appointment with the manager by e-mail.”

“I know. I am the manager!

I look at him again and ask myself: Would they even allow him to order a beer in the pub next door?

“Excuse me. I didn’t know that you, uh, sir ...”

“No worries. Everybody thinks I’m the intern. But I actually own the shop. And I know pretty much everything about sneakers. Ask me anything! And forget mister, you can call me Tom.”

He points with his right hand around the shop. It is very spartanly furnished: there are endless pairs of sneakers in white racks and in glass cases on the white walls, which for me as a layman can hardly be distinguished from one other. But I should rather think about a question to ask him.

“How many different kinds of sneakers are there?”

“Aha, the million-dollar question, right off the bat. Nobody knows for sure. Unfortunately, there is no central collection directory. So, you have to do a thorough calculation. There are the sneakers that are available commercially. They are manufactured by twenty or so brand names that constantly develop new models in their own laboratories. A label has fifteen to about fifty different models in its program. If you extrapolate that, you get three hundred to a thousand types of sneakers. We have 623 of them in stock here in the shop - the best the market has to offer.

There are also special editions. However, these are mostly only sold in selected shops. In addition to the current brand sneakers, there are the discontinued models, then the no-name and imitation products - nobody has the overview. A hundred years of sneakers means the bar is high.

“And how many sneakers fit on this bar?”

“Hmmm - that’s more a question of faith. 5,000, 10,000, 15,000? If you add the number of unfinished prototypes that the Chinese throw onto the market on top of that. The market for sneakers is huge. Germany is only mid-size when it comes to sales. We buy an average of 1.5 pairs a year. The Americans buy two to three times more than we do. And on top of that, the population is three times larger than in Germany - so they sell ten times more sneakers there.”

“But the sneakers also come from the USA.”

“Of course, the Americans act as if they invented the sneakers. But that’s not true. Nike founder Phil Knight started his career introducing Japanese sneakers to the USA. At first just by the carton. So are the Japanese the inventors? No. It started in Germany. You’re a journalist. Check out the history of Adidas and Puma - or Adi and Rudi Dassler. Now there’s a story for you!

Then I show the sneakers expert our mysterious marathon sneakers. He works them over, stretches out his right arm to look at them from a distance, then smells them, fiddles inside the inner shoe, looks for a label...

“No label, not even the tiniest one,” I comment.

“That would be too easy!”

Then Tom tries to remove the upper sole, again he smells the inside, again he intently works the upper material, then finally he places the shoe into one of the shelves on which: “Bio - Fair” is written on top.

“Difficult.”

“That’s what I thought. Can you be a little more precise?”

“Hard to say because of two conspicuous details: If I’m not mistaken, the covering material is a kind of cotton blend. There are very few sneakers that use cotton. Almost all of them are made of synthetic fabrics, mesh and other materials. Cotton absorbs moisture and expands. This can lead to stupid skin reactions, especially for long-distance runners. But the sole is very trendy. It’s air-cushioned - I’d bet my ass on that.” He takes a demonstrative breath. “So what we’ve got here: is something totally modern and somewhat antiquated. That’s a strange combination.”

“And if you had to guess a place of origin?”

“China!

“Why?”

“Simple calculus of probability. The vast majority of sneakers are made in China.”

I wish I could pick his brain for more information about sneakers, but I’m running out of time.

And that’s why I thank him, say goodbye and promise to get back to him.

“But really do that,” he shouts after me. “This is a really cool case!

11 a.m., Editorial Department *Mittagskurier*

I receive several answers in my Alibaba account. But they almost all sound the same: “We well produce this shoe, no problem!!” - Very fine, very cheap, high quality! No problem!” One even added a digital image file. On it is a photo of a running shoe. That could be ours, but the image is too small. It gets blurred when I enlarge it and somehow it is not possible to judge whether it is an image of an object that actually exists from the sender. Or whether the picture was somehow photoshopped – in other words, I can’t tell whether they simply took the picture of our shoe and added a different background by editing it on the computer.

12 p.m., Editorial Meeting

Dr. W. Weitmannsthal, our dreaded *Letter to the Editor* writer, has sent a commentary about my sneakers story. The guy is our biggest pain in the ass. He literally counts the amount of times we report about the CDU political party and how often we report about the SPD, only to write:

“Typical *Mittagskurier*...”

And today:

Is that what they call research these days? Typical *Mittagskurier*. Touch on a topic, make it appealing to the reader and then leave them out in the rain! I’m sure you’re too cowardly to print this letter! And I’ll add one more thing: If you really discover where they came from, which won’t be the case, then I’ll run naked in the next marathon and hang a sign with the *Mittagskurier* logo in front of my belly and on my back!

Our boss's face says everything about how the letter affects him: His honor is at stake!

"We'll get to the bottom of this, or I'll call it quits! If there's a second pair of these sneakers anywhere, we'll put them on exhibit in our lobby. We - we are the *Mittagkurier*! We stand for seventy years of journalistic competence and experience!"

And the whole time the boss just stood there looking at me. Even though Kleinschmidt, the business and China expert from *Impuls-Geber*, was also at the editorial meeting. That's why I got him in on the conversation right away: "I sent my request through Alibaba. And now several Chinese shoe producers are telling me that they could produce exactly the same shoes! I can't figure it out!"

The China expert spread his arms: "That's how it works: A person asks for an object. Another answers: Yes, I can produce it. And then they negotiate the details and the price."

"How are we supposed to find them all? In this gigantic country?"

"Well, today's your lucky day." Kleinschmidt looks triumphantly around the table. "Because I can help!"

"Yes?!"

"Yes. I take my right index finger, circle over China and, bang, land at the top to the right, a bit away from Hong Kong, on the Pacific coast. There's Wenzhou."

"Wenzhou?"

"Yes, Wenzhou. Never heard of it? The city, no, the metropolis, has almost 10 million inhabitants. And that's where almost all the shoes in China are manufactured. Oh, what am I saying, in the entire world. Yes, thank God China is structured like an oriental bazaar. You know, in the bazaar you've got the alleys of the blacksmiths and the alleys of the tinkerers. And in China there are provinces where certain products are produced almost exclusively: Umbrellas, Christmas decorations, lighters and so on. And Wenzhou is the shoe province."

Chapter 3: Welcome to 温州 (Wenzhou). A city full of exotic signs and happy deceivers

May 30, 4:00 p.m., extra editorial meeting at the *Mittagskurier*

“All the shoes come from this province,” the editor-in-chief asks the China expert once again.

He nods.

“Yes.”

“Then you can travel there and find the factory where our sneakers were made,” the boss concludes.

“Should we send our Beijing correspondent there?”

The boss considers briefly.

“No, Koschinski will go. He also knows his way around the world.”

“But China is totally different,” says the expert. “Despite all the trading it does throughout the world. China has sealed itself off and is very difficult for outsiders to figure them out.”

“That will make the story all the more exciting,” replies the boss and looks at me. “You’re flying to China now! You are our reporter! You go to Wenz-whatchamacallit.”

“It’s pronounced Wenzhaaaaauuu.”

“You’ll fly there and bring us back a brand-new pair of those sneakers and write a good story about how you found them.”

“And assuming I don’t find them?” I counter.

“Then you’ll bring back a great story about why you couldn’t find the sneakers - even though you put your life at risk!

“When am I supposed to fly?”

“Best would be yesterday. Tomorrow at the latest.”

After a longer conversation with our travel agency, the secretary returns to our group slightly confused.

“Flying there is easy. There are several connections a day - most via Shanghai or Hong Kong.”

“But?”

“But it’s not that easy! Foreigners are only allowed to enter China if you have obtained a visa before traveling. And the application takes a few days even with an express surcharge!

A disappointed moan makes the rounds.

“But ...!”

“A good but?”

“Yes! There’s a small loophole: Those who enter via certain airports such as Hong Kong or Shanghai have up to 144 hours visa-free transit time, if they fly on from there to a third location such as Singapore for example.”

“144 hours,” the boss calculates aloud. “That’s exactly ... uh five days equals 120 hours, then 24 are left over ... that makes six whole days! That should be enough time to find a pair of sneakers. We’ll send the China correspondent over as soon as he’s finished reporting on the meeting of the Central Committee of the Chinese CP in Beijing. And bang! We’ve got ourselves an exclusive story about the manufacturer of our sneakers. And the manufacturer will lead us to the owner, the former owner of our sneakers.” He gazes almost tenderly at his treasured pair.

“So, we’ll have an entire series of exclusive reports! We from the *Mittagskurier*! And until then I’ll have to stall the press people with some other story. They all got a taste of blood - in this case literally.”

The following day they printed both of Dr. Weitmannthal’s letters in the next issue along with an editorial statement: “We’re on it ...!”

My itinerary ended up looking like this: ICE train to Frankfurt Airport, China Air to Shanghai and from there travel to Wenzhou: a total of 13 hours and 55 minutes flight time.

Since I arrive at the Frankfurt Airport station only two and a half hours before departure, I have to run the entire way to cover the endless corridors between the train station and the airport, from the arrival and departure halls to check-in and then through security. But that’s what it was all about - I said to myself over and over again - running!

31 May, 3:10 p.m. (CET - Central European Time) somewhere over Hessen

I made it onto my plane - an old jumbo jet.

I have a seat in the middle row, directly in front of a wall. Well, at least there are no people in front of me grumbling.

But I hear this strange singing all around the cabin. A blind man would recognize where we're headed: towards China. I try to calm down: I printed out the hotel info from the internet where they booked a room for me, the address is written both in English and even in Chinese. I also have the addresses of four shoe manufacturers and the German-Chinese Chamber of Commerce, also in English and Chinese. What could possibly go wrong?

We took off at 2:40 p.m. and will reach Shanghai in about ten hours, i.e. at midnight Central European Time. But since Shanghai is in a time zone that adds seven hours, we will arrive at 7:40 a.m. So the short night is a plus practically speaking. But I can't fall asleep, I torture myself with the question: How are you supposed to find a special pair of sneakers in a juggernaut, where several thousand factories produce over three billion pairs of shoes every year?

Normally, it is not difficult for a journalist to do research in a region or city unknown to them. Other journalists are already over there. Even on a remote island in the Atlantic, there is usually at least one local reporter who provides his fellow islanders with news, gossip and, of course, (mostly wrong) weather forecasts.

But things are different in China. Journalists from the local media are leaving. Because they are all controlled by the government. Moreover, hardly any Chinese person - if he is not working in the business world - can speak or even write English properly.

Only the foreign correspondents from the rest of the world stick around. But none of them work in Wenzhou, almost all of them are based in Beijing, Shanghai or Hong Kong.

Our correspondent, whom we share with other media, also has his office in Beijing. And there he is indispensable right now because the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China is holding a meeting. Actually, it's a totally boring event. But this time they are expecting a signal from the party leader and president. Nobody can ignore the fact that China is rapidly poisoning its environment. Especially in the capital, the showcase city of Beijing, they have heavy smog for

more than 100 days a year and people rarely go outside, or if they do they wear masks over their nose and mouth.

So, no local journalists, but perhaps cultural institutions? No, there is not even a Goethe-Institut in Wenzhou. And that in a metropolis with more than nine million people!

I close my eyes and try to recall what I know about China: The country is huge; it extends from the Himalayas to the Chinese Sea across most of Asia. I also know a little about its history. The name “China” derives from Qin, the first emperor of China. But the Chinese themselves don’t use the name at all - I just don’t know why or what they call their country instead...

I must have dozed off for a few minutes, because I jolted awake when the wing of the plane took a hard curve in preparation for landing.

And down there I see something incredible: huge arched glass halls connected by seemingly endless glass tunnels - next to them the planes look like small toys. That must be the new, ultra-modern Pandong Airport in Shanghai. Sometimes things only seem large from a distance. But here it’s the other way around.

I get my transit visa from a border official. I have to leave at 8 a.m. on 7 June at the latest, so I have exactly six days.

When I enter one of several arrival and departure halls via the gangway, I feel tiny. The arched roof of the hall seems to form a kind of artificial sky - long white poles with lamps and signs jut downwards with lamps and signs attached to them. The people walking through the halls look like Playmobil figures.

But I don’t have a second longer to be amazed, I barely have two hours before my plane departs for Wenzhou, and I still have to make it to the national section of the airport. At least the large blue display boards are, so to speak, trilingual: apart from the Chinese characters, there are not only the English names, but also pictograms, i.e. simplifying pictograms that are easy to understand.

When I finally reach my departure gate, they almost finished boarding. I enter the Air China plane, which will take me to Longwan Airport in Wenzhou in one hour and twenty minutes.

There are no journalist colleagues over there so my plan looks like this:

First, through Alibaba, I've arranged to meet the four shoe factories that claim they have my sneakers or can make them.

Second, I have an appointment with a Mr. Schmidt-Chen from the German-Chinese Chamber of Commerce. He wants to show me around Wenzhou, supposedly he will also include a shoe factory there.

Third, I will simply set off on my own until our correspondent arrives. I've done that many times before and achieved amazing results in the process. Experiences and encounters that wonderfully can later be incorporated in a report.