

## Chapter Eighteen Excerpt

I just finally went to Beijing! Well, kind of. I'd been teaching this private student, Peggy, and she's about to open a café in Nanjing, a new branch of a café in Beijing that was asking for entrepreneurial partnerships (ie chain stores). I know about business, marketing, advertising, and, most importantly, about the foreigners in Nanjing, a market that she clearly knows nothing about. Thusly, she invited me to come to Beijing with her, see the shop, and talk with one half of the company, ie the half that looks after promotions. And, also, she'd pay for it. Rich friends are nice to have.

What I remember of the four-hour train trip was the landscape, and the perfectly blue skies – a landscape of gorgeous, tree-studded rocks, with a carpet of green below them, and vast expanse of blue above them...oh, actually, I haven't mentioned the weather lately. I'll get off the train for a paragraph to tell you.

Most of July and half of August this year here were scorchers, but, unlike previous years, there's been a huge amount of rain in many parts of the country (Beijing was flooded in August), including Jiangsu province, and the result of this has been *staggeringly* blue skies, the kind of blue I haven't seen for years (I even saw a shooting star one night! I hadn't seen one of those since Red Horse Lake, over four years ago). Then along came Typhoon Haikui (*tai feng hai kui* (台风海葵). *Haikui* means sea anemone, a strange thing to name a typhoon after, but hey), around August, which ripped through Zhejiang province, said hi to Hangzhou in a very intimate way, went straight through Yencheng, went so close to Shanghai that it *closed for a day* (everyone was told not to go to work), and, on the ninth, came within six hundred k's of Nanjing, which created wild weather...but the result of *that* has been a massively reduced temperature *and* continued clear, wonderful, happiness-creating blue skies. Now I've given you a belated weather report, I'll get back on the train.

Heading northeast, I was, to be honest, astounded at how blue the sky was – especially after how much I've gone on and on and on

about grey skies. My fellow passengers (Peggy and her business partner, Shirley), however, simply yawned and got back on their iPhones.

Once there, we caught a taxi, and I kept my face plastered to the windows, eager to see the mighty Beijing, China's cultural titan, after hearing so much about it for six years. A couple of my expectations were instantly flushed down the drain; namely, they *still* throw garbage out car windows. I'll be honest, I was *very* surprised...but, then again, I wasn't. More on these things later, as some of my other expectations/assumptions get squashed under The Bloated Ass Of Reality.

We were heading to the Sanlitun (三里屯) area, and, as it turned out, this place would be most of what I saw this visit. But first, we'd have lunch. I was happy with anything – dirty street food was fine with me. I didn't mind. It seems, however, that they minded. A lot.

We went to a Thai restaurant called Laburnum, which was sublime – the tastebud massaging started with Thai curry king prawns, then a fish grilled with palate-exciting spices so endorphin-releasing that it put the MSG-drenched street food in Nanjing to shame... everything on that table tasted *exquisite* [here are my thoughts on MSG after eating the stuff for years. It totally deadens your sense of taste – it's as if all the food you get here somehow tastes impossibly good, no matter how cheap it is...speaking for myself, this substance, which started life as a "flavour enhancer", has, over time, done exactly the opposite – after scoffing stuff drowned in it for years, everything now tastes unnaturally delicious, and I mean everything. The result of over-exposure to it is, at least for me, the palate itself forgetting what real tastes are. To try to explain what I mean, the experience of eating at this Thai restaurant was, for me, kind of the palate's equivalent of a first yoga class – suddenly I was reminded of muscles that I'd simply forgotten that I had, because I hadn't used them in years. To put it another way, MSG had, after years of eating here, made my mouth become accustomed to a tidal wave of standardised flavour rushing in, and all but drowning it, instead of the more subtle idea of the palate going out and exploring new environments of delicate and intermingling flavours. In other words,

*many of the flavours that I'm used to back in Australia require the palate to go out and find, but, with MSG, the only thing the palate needs to do is sit and wait for the flood. This notion only really struck me when I was editing this part on the Thai restaurant...but now that I've thought of it, I think it's very true. After all, why else would restaurant-served soup noodles, costing fifty kuai, taste no better (or different) than twenty-cent stir-fried rice on a street corner at three in the morning (and believe me, I've had that many times)? Well, these are my own observations after eating MSG-laden dishes for nearly ten years, and you'll hear more when I get back to Oz. Interesting].*

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We checked in, and I went out and scored a map. I found where we were, and the nearest subway station. Found Tiananmen Square (hard to miss). Found Forbidden City (hard to miss). Found the Summer Palace (hard to miss). The Wall...the Wall...the Wall...uuuum...the Wall...uuuum, Wall, where are you? Heeeeeello, Wall, are you there? I couldn't believe it. Of course I knew it wasn't in the city - the nearest bit was in the north-east somewhere - but I couldn't believe that here I was, looking at a map of Beijing, and I couldn't find the Wall anywhere. You can see it from space, can you? Oh, *really*?? Oh, canst thou now?

I had a quick squiz around Sanlitun - imagine Melbourne's Federation Square with the art galleries and museums replaced by fashion label clothes stores and expensive restaurants. There's also an area with water jets leaping from the cement, with some completely naked kids playing in it - one of those sights you just wouldn't see back in Oz I guess. I quickly sussed that this place was what foreigners in China for a few days wanted - cheap pirated movies, expensive food, a ton of fake-or-otherwise label clothes, and bars.

Eventually, we caught a taxi to go have a hotpot dinner with a couple of her friends in a Muslim section of the city, going past the southern entrance of Tiananmen Square (on Chang'an lu (长安路), apparently the main road of Beijing - remember, Chang'an

is Xi'an's old name, which was the capital of China for the longest time, so naming the current capital's main street after it is fitting), and saw some flag-raising ceremony, which happens every day, and many people go to see for some reason that's personally beyond me.

While we were nattering over hot pot, with no air conditioning but, instead, a collection of fans to counter the fact that we all had a small oven each (remember, that's what hot pot is), my travelling companions were finally emailed the final contract from the café they were about to go into a legal partnership with.

They read it. Read it again. Made a phone call or two. Read it again. Bit their metaphorical nails. Clearly they were quite befuddled by it (it was eighteen pages long). We'd half-agreed that we'd meet tomorrow at ten and go to the café, but I could tell from that moment that it wouldn't happen. It was kind of an odd situation for me personally, because I'd studied contracts, and I know what to look for in them, but just not in this language – give me an eighteen-page contract in Chinese, and I'm about as useful as a Japanese to Latvian dictionary if you're a Mongolian lost in New Zealand.

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I scouted Sanlitun's bar area that night, trying to sniff out anything that looked like live music, or, well, just *anything* I couldn't find in Nanjing. So, what did I find? Well...walking down the bars lining the right side of the street, as a foreigner, I heard an unending chorus of "lady bar" "lady bar" "you want lady bar?" "lady bar" "lady bar" "you want lady bar?" "lady bar" "lady bar" "you want lady bar?" "lady bar" "lady bar" "you want lady bar?"...there's around ten or fifteen bars nextdoor to each other, and, outside each, there's anywhere between two and four guys trying to drag people in, and those words are what they use to try to do it...even when I crossed the road trying to get away from the monotonous gauntlet, people from *other* bars saw me and came running, yelping the same words. I even made a game of one guy – I wove around

cars and people, trying to throw him off, but he kept following me, as if he was a homing missile armed with a two-word vocabulary.

I spotted a pole-dancer or two, which just wasn't what I was looking for. I found the places with live "music" ...just coversville. I didn't see much else that night. I just settled in one place and had a couple of beers, while watching a reasonably loathsome quartet in a place called Swing Bar, and it showed me, again, all the problems that I have with bands like this, and my confusion as to why anyone would want to listen to them. The main one is why would anyone want to hear songs that they love being decimated by people who weren't born to perform them? The girl heading the band tonight (Chinese, but said and sung almost everything in English), sounded a lot like Tina Turner, so I copped a few Turner covers - seeing a bunch of middle-aged, drunk foreigners in the corner pumping their hands in the air to "The Best" was a sad sight to see. I wondered to myself, will my spirit be similarly mushed one day? Should I just accept my fate and join them now in this grotesque parody of musical reminiscing? Is this "maturity"? When I'm fifty or sixty, will I be with a bunch of spiritually thwarted people in a place like this, while bored people thirty years my junior make me relive the "good ol' nineties" with Faith No More, RATM and Tool covers? Such were my thoughts while I sat through "Money For Nothing", sculling a fifty-*kuai* beer.

Something that I did notice tonight, though, was the dress sense of some people, especially the foreigners - some were *really* stylish, but not in a try-hard kind of way, like some in Nanjing, but instead naturally, well, cool. *Normal* looking people...people who still know who they are, and where they're going. So many foreigners here in China have lost that. Many of the young students only have a good guess as to what they'll do with these studies/experiences, and many old people, well, they're off the radar, in so many contexts, including off their own. So many people's careers and/or lives go wildly off the rails when they come to work in China (sometimes positively, sometimes not)...like me. I planned to be here just one year, as you know...I had no idea that that's what thousands before me thought would happen but didn't. But

these people in Beijing...well, some of them...they struck me as if they still *knew what they were doing*. What I'm saying here sounds really intangible, but, well, I could sense it.

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Next morning, since the girls still needed time with the contract, I just went out to see what I could see. Sanlitun, during the day, is another universe. The "lady bar" people had scuttled away, and, replacing them, there was flocks of another sub-phylum, The Rich Foreigner, but, unlike Nanjing, they were of only one socio-economic stratum - *rich*. Whether it was anywhere between middle class rich and fuck-man-that-should-be-illegal rich, they were all there on that bright, sunny day, eager to have a zillion-dollar meal, buy a fake version of absolutely anything that is ever worn by anyone anywhere, and hang around this little oasis of high-class multiculturalism, which, I must say, didn't seem *forced*, unlike most parts of Wuhan, where foreign stuff is being forced down the local's throat whether they liked it or not.

After that, I headed for the subway stop on the south-west corner of Tiananmen Square, and bumped into the main walking street, Wang Fu Jing (王府井). Heading north, I found about half a k's worth of street food, all neatly lined up next to each other, on Donganmen Dajie (东安门大街), clearly designed for those new to China - tons of street food, but it's presented neatly, not dirty or messy (ie normal). The only thing that I hadn't seen before was a table of things on skewers, including huge starfish, huntsman-sized black spiders, silkworm cocoons, snakes, and sharks about thirty centimetres long - everyone was taking photos of it, even the locals.

I went back south along the mall, and found something that I certainly hadn't found before in China...a bar in the street, the kind of enclosed areas in front of pubs and cafés during street festivals in Australia. Woohoo! thought I, and bought myself a beer and started writing these notes while people-watching.

I watched as the city transformed from one environment to a completely different one as dusk washed over it...the sunlight and umbrellas disappeared, and slowly, the bulbs, neon and LEDs came crawling out; some small and shy, like the lonely bulb above a drinks fridge; some loud, blazon and bold, like the advertising/TV screen that exploded into kinetic life at the last hue of sundown. And, of course, everything in between – an ocean of artificial lights, some assisting, some advertising, some educating, some guiding, but all blazing, combining to create an entirely new universe where another one had been sitting not even an hour and a half before. Humanity, I thought, you're a strange species.

Adding to the abstract feeling was that nothing around here was more than, say, eight or ten storeys high. Of course, it helped that Tiananmen Square/Forbidden City was directly to the west, meaning the entire skyline was totally empty in that direction. That really affected the character of this place, on first impressions, for me. Leaving that bar, I found another in the middle of the street, this one selling German/Irish-sized pints.

Obviously, I needed to get one. Obviously.

I figured that that was about all I could see...if there was any punk/indie/decent pub around, it'd be nowhere around here, so I ended up back in the Sanlitun area.

Here, I saw something that I hadn't seen before – these people like hot pot. A *lot*. A huge chunk of this street, on both sides, was simply seats, tables, tubs of oily boiling water, and trays and trays and trays of stuff to put in them. The entire street was *buzzing* – I mean, it had the usual visual explosion of thousands of coloured lights vying for attention, and the ever-flowing river of people and the usual variety of people-moving machines, as well as the usual aural explosion of cars honking and bikes screeching, with both of these sounds swimming in an aural ocean of a thousand dialects, but the hot pots really changed the character of this street, and it's little things like this that keep me surprised in China, six years and many cities later. This street looked like a Chinese *Blade Runner*

all right, except that everyone was sitting on brightly-coloured plastic seats. A visual feast.

I found some kind of indie pub, with, encouragingly, posters advertising upcoming gigs and festivals. *Something happens here.*

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For brekkie the following day, we finally went to the café – Ms Bonbon, or, *Misi Tianxin* (密斯甜心), and it's a lavish affair. White décor, clean lines, huge mirrors. I was impressed.

I got to talk with the owners, two maybe early-thirties, stylishly-dressed girls whose different personalities gave very different auras. I was mainly there to talk to Stephanie, the promo girl, who I was meant to throw promotional and advertising ideas around with. Stephanie was very much the opposite of the other owner, Michelle...Michelle is clearly a hands-on, people person; Stephanie, on the other hand, sits and sizes you up from afar...a bit of a Ying and Yang thing.

My main questions involved what kind of advertising channels Stephanie had been using. The answer was none – it seems that in Sanlitun, all a business needed to do was plonk its ass there, look good and wait – word of mouth would do the rest. And, well, a place this big (it only has room for about thirty-five) didn't really need more advertising. So I gave her a rundown of promo and advertising opps in Nanjing's foreign demographic, and upon hearing this, she neither erupted in an explosion of euphoric glee, nor spiraled into an operatic state of lament worthy of a Shakespearian tragedy. She just sat formally with glossy lipstick and a cup of tea in her lap.

Oh well. My job was done. So that was my first trip to Beijing.

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Something occurred to me as the Chinese landscape sped past me on the train. After seeing field after field pass me, all of them stretching into the distance and only separated by roads, or clusters of buildings here and there, or monitoring stations huddling together to keep each other company – for *hundreds and hundreds of kilometres* – I realised that their immense population's need for food has forever *changed their land*. I mentioned before how every square centimetre is used for something – well, the vast majority of the couple of thousand k's or so from Nanjing to Beijing are *fields*. What a monumental change to a land, I thought, especially since most of it wouldn't even be five hundred years old.

It was also amazing to think of people's lives out here, literally hundreds of kilometres from the nearest town that had more than a few streets, and even *those* streets were many, many kilometres from each other (I know, I was noticing them). Often I'd see people walking herds of pigs or sheep, but, more intriguing to me, were the kids – I saw a bunch of 'em playing basketball outside a tiny little school, which was, I could see, the only school in the surrounding few hundred kilometres. The implications were mind-boggling to me, particularly as it made me realise that the education system, and the world of marks, pressure, academic life and even my own job may well be another universe to many people out here; my life is an alternate reality at best, as they happily slam dunk a ball in the middle of nowhere.

There's *thousands upon thousands* of people out here who will never even *taste* the life that I'm part of; some of them would want to, but perhaps more of them couldn't give a toss. Of course, similarly segregated universes are in all countries, just some more than others. Australia would have, maybe, a couple of hundred thousand with rural lives like this; China would have a few thousand million. When I saw some old geezer in a huge straw hat walking down the maybe ten-kilometre path between fields with a handful of sheep behind him, I just wanted to jump out and talk to the guy. Some people like this can be wells of wisdom, education or no education, but all I could do was rush past him in a capsule of metal; a new, alien addition to the landscape, one that

he would have seen being built in the last decade or two. Different lives, different worlds.

From these hundreds of kilometres of fields, I saw one scarecrow.

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