

## Chapter Five...early February to late February 2007...in which I see an ocean of black hair and a drunken free jazz symphony of fireworks

Hi peeps!!!

I just went to Wuhan zoo, specifically for the panda, who was asleep, but I was happy. The zoo is in Hanyang, Wuhan's third city...I'd been told that there's not much out there. I wanted to see if these rumours were true.

They are.

Now, Shanghai!

I just visited Shanghai for a week during their New Year's Eve. If you like fireworks, Shanghai this time of year is the best of times. Also, if you want to see all that Shanghai has to offer while it's closed, it's also the best of times. I'll get to that soon. The main thing, though, is that, during this holiday, places get crowded. How crowded, I had no idea. Now I do.

I checked into the Astor House Hotel, which is apparently the first westerner-owned hotel in China, built in 1846. The room itself wasn't amazing, but it was cool in an old-style kind of way. Along one wall on the third floor were portraits of people who'd stayed there, among which were Einstein and Charlie Chaplain [*this place has a stunning history. Look it up*].

After a quasi-western style brekkie on the ground floor (which is, in China, the *first* floor - they have no ground floor), I went exploring. The first thing that struck me was, compared to Wuhan, how *clean* the joint is. People actually use garbages here. They still spit, but, in the CBD, they seem to spit into garbages instead of anywhere. Another thing that stuck me is the corporate advertising - since China opened up to western business, corporations have blatantly gone woo-farkin'-hoo and saturated the place with their visual

pollution...a boat on the river here was just a massive, two-storey screen showing ads to the billions of people on the foreshore, and, perplexingly, they were taking photos of it [*on my second trip to Shanghai in 2012, not only did they have TV screens on the back of taxi cab seats (for the backseat passengers), but these touchscreens actually give you a choice of the commercial that you, apparently, want to see*].

On first impressions, Shanghai reminded me of Sydney, at least more than, say, Melbourne. Drivers seem to indicate, stay vaguely in lanes, and vaguely obey the little green man. The western-based CBD is surprisingly small, to be honest, especially as I explored it in the next few days – you only have to go a short distance away from the mega-commercial areas for Shanghai to revert back to garbage-throwing, proudly spitting hagglers akin to Wuhanese. I had an overpriced beer or two at a bar, while trying to decipher my way around three maps, all of which had totally different pinyin, trying to find my way to the Bund, which is basically the foreshore. Once there, I saw...uuuuuu...people. And more people. I'm guessing there was a foreshore there, since the map told me that there was, but I couldn't see it, unless the map just didn't mention that the Bund was actually covered in a pulsating black carpet that lived about a metre and a half off the ground.

That night, I struck up conversations with people, simply because they spoke English. It's strange to be language-starved...that's part of the experience of living in a place like Wuhan, it seems, and so Shanghai was, to me, a rock pool in the middle of a linguistic desert. It's a very tangible feeling.

| 鸡 |

Next morning, I went to Shanghai museum, in People's Square, or *ren min guang chang* (人民广场). This museum is *amazing* – absolutely stunning in its bewildering *thoroughness*. Pretty well everything remotely archaeological in China's history is here somewhere – art, pottery, calligraphy, currency, bells, furniture, jade, stone sculptures, ceremonial and theatrical masks, ceramics, bronze, seals (ie stamps), each one with a third of a floor devoted

to it.

The calligraphy section really got my interest, since I've been learning the language. According to the captions, calligraphy started (not surprisingly) as an aesthetic pastime, mainly for the elite, but started to become a serious form of communication about eight hundred years ago (before that, communication down the generations was spoken – it was the same across Europe). It was interesting to recognise characters on these ancient scrolls. For instance, I saw their characters for “big” and “mountain” in something eight hundred years old, and dozens of characters undergoing linguistic evolution.

All in all, this museum is *amazing*. If you come here looking for champagne-coated pole dancers gyrating to an extended Fatboy Slim remix, you'll leave in a state of lament; but if you're looking for a flamboyant introduction to a startlingly alien culture, you'll leave *thoroughly* impressed.

Then I went looking for a joint to chow at...which, surprisingly, proved hard. Remember, this was their *New Year's Eve* – in the west, this is exactly when venues are pumping, but, here, the only food places open were KFC, Maccas and Pizza Hut, the last of which, unbelievably, with a queue spilling outside the door [*this is not uncommon. As daggy as we think Pizza Hut is in Oz, the Chinese, at the moment, consider it to be a luxurious slice of western decadence; a high-class restaurant. Believe it or not*]. After eventually finding somewhere and scoffing, I wandered out to find the city slowly going manic with fireworks. At this point, I should give some kind of prologue regarding fireworks in China. Firstly, they invented the stuff. Secondly, Brian had warned me that, on NYE, they go apeshit with 'em. So I was expecting to see a firework or two.

But *no way* did that prepare me for the scale of it.

By far the most prevalent thing about fireworks here, from my experience tonight, is that you hear a lot, but see very little, because the buildings are monolithic, and many of the fireworks

don't go that high...but the scale of it nullified both these aspects. Everywhere I went, people were lighting fireworks on the street. Any street, any space, any time...outside every shop, on any momentarily carless street, in any alley, people were lighting anything from skyrocketing visual dazzlers to ground-bound lines of explosives that wreak havoc on any passing set of eardrums. Walking around in this environment is a combination of vibrant, exciting, and nerve-wracking - everywhere you go, there's one hundred percent chance that someone's going to light a firework a metre or two away from you, and the first you'll know of it is when it explodes. If you have poor nerves, this is a night for a bottle of scotch, sleeping pills and hardcore earplugs.

Around eleven, I got to the hotel and expected to see a couple of fireworks, since I was on the fifth floor. A firework or two, I thought. Oh, naïve little me. Because the Chinese are fireworks aficionados, the fireworks here come in many shapes and sizes, and the preferred size for the hardcore fireworker, it seems, is a box a bit bigger than a metre square, and the idea is that you light one corner of it and run (or walk calmly around it as if nothing's happening, like these people were doing). Out of this will shoot maybe sixty big fireworks, one or two at a time, so one of these boxes is about ten or fifteen minute's worth. But, apparently, that's not enough...they kept dragging out box after box after box after box, occasionally having seven or eight going at once, all over the street, along with a multitude of little things perpetually going off in the smoking periphery. In the thick of it, outside the window was a wall of thick smoke, and the fireworks started exploding at ground level, with some exploding level with my window. After about an hour and a half, three or four boxes were bonfires, and the entire street was covered in smoking cardboard...but they just kept on fireworking. They started throwing the fireworks *into* the fires. Behind the other buildings to my left and right, other mobs were obviously doing the same thing, as the surrounding towers of metal and glass reflected explosions of light and colour from different blocks. Important lesson in Chinese culture - when it comes to fireworks, these people do *not* screw around.

It finally eddied off around two am, and I dozed off, my head swimming with Brian's warning that, apparently, this goes on for a week or so...

| 鴨 |

Next day, I saw the main walking street turned into a vibrant, colourful show, with dancing dragons, and the usual collection of percussion instruments like hand cymbals and tinny-sounding bongoes bashing away. Even though I'd seen it all before in Melbourne, seeing it in Shanghai, on their New Year's Day, was unique...I happily drank it in, uncaring that I looked like a tourist.

I went towards an arts precinct that Brian'd told me about, looking for any contemporary art. On the way, I saw beggars with skin conditions, quite often infants, their faces half or totally black or red. I don't know what causes this. Sometimes it looks like burns, but I think they're hereditary conditions of some sort. Walking around today, I saw them, and also kids with hand deformities, with one kid in particular as if he'd been born with two hands on the one arm, so that one of his or her hands was just a clump of meshed fingers. Other kids had fingers the wrong way around. Tons of missing limbs too. I've been told that Vietnam's streets are still filled with the mutants created by Agent Orange, so the few people that I saw, or see, in China, no matter how alarming, are apparently not much compared to some places in the world. Sobering stuff.

When I got to this arts precinct, it was, not to my astronomically gargantuan surprise, shut, which was a shame, because one of the things I really miss about Australia is the art openings [*it took me years to find an art gallery in Wuhan that had openings - I've heard that only the sponsors and officials get invited, and therefore no-one knows about them. Also, all the art in the opening that I did find was priced for investment. It was about as indie as a custom-made submarine*].

I then just took in whatever there was to take in, which was, this time of year, not much - I walked and walked, and there was

*nothing* open. Block after block after block. I got to see a lot of Shanghai though, so that was OK (I couldn't see it the day before, there were too many people - Shanghai yesterday looked like ten thousand ants eating a banana).

After experiencing a couple of unusual situations, like a couple of local gay guys trying to pick me up, and being lured down an alley into a nightclub/meat market by a woman out in the mall saying "you want beer bar? You want beer bar?", I found myself back on The Bund. Here, I wondered what most of China was doing there with me - I figured they were all there to see something, but, if so, I never found out what it was. Maybe they were there to see crowds. If so, they succeeded admirably - and this, in turn, created more crowds for the already-present crowds to see, which I guess made both the new and the old crowds happier and happier. However, I didn't really come here to see that, as statistic-bending as the sight was, so I ended up back at the hotel, and had a rice wine, called *baijiu*, or two. This stuff is astonishingly potent, usually fifty to sixty-five percent alcohol. I watched some TV...English soccer dubbed into Chinese is bizarrely entertaining.

| 鸡 |

Last day...I went to the other side of the river, an area called Pudong. My main memory is, again, crowds. On both sides of the river *and* all the way in between, there were ziiiiiiiillions of people - I felt that every bipedal ape on Earth was there, every single one of them hell-bent on getting in my way.

There was a "sightseeing tunnel", where you get in a little bubble on tracks, and go to Pudong under the river while being treated to a French-designed lightshow. "Sightseeing", eh? Well, by definition, they were "sights", and I guess I was "seeing" them, but I wouldn't really call it "sightseeing" - it was like an 80's Jean-Michelle Jarre concert, when stage lighting was still a developing artform. Maybe I've just been spoiled by the likes of Tool and Roger Waters, but I just stood there, unimpressed, while everyone else ooohed and aaahed as if it was the best show they'd seen all

year.

After about a twenty-minute trip, we got to Pudong. Well, look, there's the Pearl Tower that Shanghai is famous for (dunno why – it's ghastly), but I couldn't really find much else, except for a *massive* western-style shopping centre. I went through its computerised store guide (all in Chinese), looking for a music shop, and I found *none*. A shopping complex with so many stores that it makes the average mathematician dizzy, and there was *not one* music store. What does this mean? What would Confucius say?

So, after seeing how crowded this place with seemingly nothing in it was, not to mention the rather unspectacularly phallic tower that seventy quillion people were, for some reason, trying to get into, I pretty well ran screaming, retreating back to the "sightseeing" tunnel. Oh, how I failed to rejoice at seeing this show a second time, but, alas, 'twas my fate. I only had a couple of hours before the flight back, so I ended up in People's Square again, where there were only fifty billion people instead of an infinite number.

The plane left at eight pm, and, as my last sight of Shanghai, I serendipitously saw one of the most wondrous things I'd ever seen – *flying over fireworks*. Leaving Shanghai, the city was covered in explosions of light that coated the metropolis like a spellbinding technicolour blanket – and, as we flew over rural China, back to Hubei, fireworks decorated the otherwise black horizon, consistently illuminating the sky in the near or far distance. During the entire trip, there were at least three clusters of bright red, yellow or green at any given time, all dressed in a cloud of white light, either right under us, or somewhere on the darkened horizon. One of the most magical things I'd ever seen from a plane was a lightning storm from *above* the clouds – these fireworks were just as mesmerising, albeit for completely different reasons. One spectacle natural, one not, yet both a feast for the eyes.

So here I am, back in Wuhan, which Shanghai has affected my views on – people stare at westerners here simply because they *haven't* seen us before...I knew this before, but the amount of

westerners in Shanghai, and its effect on staring, was staggering. Also, compared to Shanghai, Wuhan is comparatively untouched by the west. Don't get me wrong, the west is here by the corporationful, but it hasn't really affected the average person here, on the street level, whereas in Shanghai, the west, with all its glories and demons, have truly changed the landscape, and many people's lifestyles. I guess the most glaring example (except the advertising, commodities and fashion) is English – it's been assimilated into Shanghai CBD, whereas in Wuhan, the natives can still comfortably get away with not knowing a syllable of it. So Wuhan, compared to Shanghai, is in a massive state of interim – the west is in Wuhan, but it has yet to truly devour the east, which is sitting placidly (and messily) in its path. For better or worse, depending on your viewpoint, Wuhan simply needs time...in the meantime, the East and the West in Wuhan will continue their current act of simultaneously attacking and exploiting one another.

One last thing...after this holiday, do I feel relaxed and rejuvenated? Hell no. I feel like a rat that's just shot up a syringe of caffeine. From my experience, the expression "relaxing holiday in Shanghai" is a textbook definition of "oxymoron", right up there with "cricket highlights".

I should go...love you all...

Ash