

## **SEA, SUNSHINE, SAND, NATURE, NOSTALGIA, NIRVANA.**

February 2008

Dear All,

Although I thoroughly enjoy putting pen to paper and recounting details of my daily life, I am conscious of the fact that news from China is pretty much an everyday event now – something that became quite apparent over the Christmas holidays. Barely a day went by when there wasn't something sensational about the People's Republic in the British media. So, whilst hoping what I have to say will entertain if not exactly amaze or enlighten you, there is probably more than a little self-indulgence in what follows.

I have done my fair share of travelling over the last couple of months, and, having evaded most of the atrocious weather that has attacked China in recent weeks, am now back in Tianjin, in the midst of a second attack of New Year celebrations. My first New Year, back home in England, was a very civilised affair - light years away from what I see and hear around me at the moment, where the Year of the Rat is currently being hailed in grand style. China's festivities have been going on for well over a week now and there is no let up in sight. With no regard for the calendar let alone the clock, Chinese fireworks light the sky and firecrackers assault the eardrums day and night. Wondrous to behold, but wearing on the senses after more than a few days bombardment.

The rat is the first sign of the Chinese zodiac, and rats, we are told, are leaders, pioneers and conquerors; they are passionate, charming, charismatic, practical, hardworking, intelligent, ambitious, versatile and energetic. Rats seem to have quite a lot going for them in fact – despite the unfortunate picture we westerners might have of them. Whilst common sense surely dictates that human rats should have at least some negative characteristics to counter all these positive attributes, in China one regularly has to read between the lines in order to get to the darker side of things. Passionate but fickle maybe, charming if not sincere, charismatic but perhaps a little shallow ...

And talking of reading between the lines, I am of the definite opinion that there are rather tighter controls on the Chinese press these days. Not so long ago I was able to read quite a lot of so-called investigative journalism in newspapers such as *China Daily*, much of which was fairly critical of the government, particularly at local level, and of the corruption possibly inherent in a one-party political system. Now it may be my imagination, but it certainly seems to me that such articles are becoming a bit harder to find, and instead, we are treated to dreary pages of print wholly supportive of party policy, extolling the unfeasible saintliness of ordinary people who have done extraordinary things for the good of the country, and rarely even suggesting that party officials might be up to no good. For a country that is, in so many ways, opening up to the world, this blatant one-sidedness is a strange contradiction indeed.

Not that one-party politics doesn't have its virtues – at least some of the more important things get done sooner rather than later - and in a country which uses an incredible three billion grocery bags a day, the recent bit of government legislation banning the plastic bag later this year probably has to be applauded. I would

emphasise the word *probably* however; there is always a slim chance of unanticipated side effects – such as those that have arisen since the increased mass production of bio-fuels.

Given the appalling weather that has gripped much of central China, Tianjin has got off very lightly indeed. In fact, the weather over the last few weeks, although as cold as ever and with a biting wind, has been beautifully sunny with only the merest hint of snow. Nevertheless, I decided to escape to Hainan Island, China's southernmost undisputed province, and after a bit of hunting around on the internet, booked myself into a Chinese youth hostel in Sanya – China's only tropical seaside city. With regular hotels charging four or even five times more for rooms over the holiday period, I decided to go significantly down market and use whatever money I might save in other directions. It was a good move too – although I did find myself gravitating towards the five-star "Holiday Inn" for the odd cup of coffee and occasional light lunch more than once. And although the weather was generally overcast and rather cooler than forecast, it was still warm enough to laze on the beach and slap on some *Factor 30*. In all, it was perfect for catching up with some reading (Santa Claus was particularly generous with books last Christmas) and enjoying the sea air.



*Light lunch at the Holiday Inn- YaLong Bay*

I said a while back, that Hainan was the southernmost *undisputed* part of China. There are, unfortunately, disputes, and one of these is to do with China's claim to the delightfully named Spratly Islands way to the south of Hainan - just off the

coast of Vietnam, and Borneo to be precise. The reason, of course, is oil, and who knows what will happen next? But Beijing is clearly flexing its muscles, having recently set up the municipality of Sansha on the islands. I have also noticed them marked in red (along with Taiwan of course) on all the maps of China displayed in my school – one map incongruously and, I am sure, unintentionally placed alongside a student display proclaiming that wellbeing comes from working out a means of sharing resources.

But back to Sanya. Blessed with a tropical climate and several sandy if somewhat scruffy beaches (Dadonghai beach just yards away from the hostel, with the rather more up-market YaLong Bay and its seven kilometer beach a short bus trip away) tourism, both national and international, is probably the sole reliable source of income. And judging by the posters and other advertisements around the place, Russian tourists would seem to be the largest group of foreigners around, with considerable evidence of services laid on for what are euphemistically referred to as “business travellers”. So little of it was in English though that I needed all my basic Chinese just to get by let alone find out what was really on offer.

The Li and Miao minority groups were the original inhabitants of Hainan, and they are still to be found in small pockets in the mountainous central region of the island. However, as my guidebook warned me that the villages on the bus routes were predominantly tourist villages, intended as attractions for the Han Chinese, and because I had always reckoned on this being a relaxing holiday anyway, I decided to give them a miss – I doubted my Chinese skills would have been sufficient for an authentic encounter in the middle of the rainforest.

Although I try hard to be non-judgmental about these things, I often find the Han Chinese attitude towards the minority groups pretty distasteful. For it is a fact that, as the dominant group, Han values are imposed on almost everything they touch, whether it be by diluting local ethnic groups as a result of resettling in their traditional areas, preserving them as tourist attractions, or by the rather more disturbing stories one hears from time to time involving a sort of reverse ethnic cleansing whereby local ethnic groups send quotas of workers to the factories on the east coast. Whether the huge numbers of peasant workers we have in the Tianjin area are the product of such labour or of something rather more voluntary I dare not investigate. I am not likely to read much about it in *China Daily* either. But it is a fact that these weaker and more vulnerable groups seem not to inspire much in the way of compassion.

One group that was in evidence in Sanya itself however was the five thousand or so strong Hui, a Muslim minority who have been on Hainan for several centuries. With their characteristic darker skin, headscarves (for the women) and altogether sharper features, they ostensibly run the money changing businesses on the island although the ones I came across seemed to be of a rather more humble persuasion - bus conductors, map sellers and market stall holders.

Although I had planned this to be a beach holiday, I made a few trips out of Sanya, one of which was forty or so kilometers to the west, to visit a resort and country park at Nanshan and, in particular, to see the statue of Guanyin that was unveiled there a couple of years ago. This huge effigy to the Chinese Buddhist Goddess of Mercy, is, at 108 meters, bigger than the Statue of Liberty and it has to be said, not

my idea of good taste at all. But for those who like concrete it is surely a total triumph and, if I am being positive about things, might even see it as another small step in the Chinese authority's increasing tolerance of religion.



*Nanshan Buddhism Cultural Theme Park - sea, sunshine, sand, nature, nostalgia ... Nirvana*

But before I get too carried away, my thoughts go back a few years to Kashgar, in the far west of Xinjiang Province. Here, I remember, the indigenous Uighur population being allowed to practise moderate Islam. But, alas, all was not what it seemed. “Are you a Muslim?” I remember asking one young man in Kashgar. “Of course” he replied. “And do you worship in the mosque?” I enquired. His face fell. “It is not possible” he said. “Students and government workers are not permitted to do this. We can visit but we cannot pray.” I wasn’t aware of many people praying at Nanshan either, for all its swanky temples and manicured lawns, and for some Chinese I fear, there would have been little difference between the giant Guanyin and a huge Mickey Mouse. Indeed even the publicity calls it a Theme Park – where you can be assured of the three S’s and the three N’s: sea, sunshine, sand, nature, nostalgia, Nirvana – but only after having paid your 150 RMB (ten pounds) entry fee. There is certainly little that is holy here any more - if there ever was. Whatever the commercial future may hold though, Chinese Buddhism has some way to go before it can match Japan’s latest craze, which, perhaps taking a lead from the C of E with its appetite for harvest suppers, Lent lunches and coffee mornings, has evangelising priests mixing cocktails in a number of Tokyo bars as a

means of encouraging the not-so-faithful to get to what might be called their spiritual roots.

I have often felt that there are a surprising number of Chinese who seem rather ill at ease at the seaside, and my Sanya experiences wholly confirmed this view. As a race they clearly realise that they are supposed to enjoy themselves, but, on the whole, do not seem really sure how to set about doing it.



*The Chinese at the Seaside – Dadonghai Beach*

At Dadonghai for example, groups of men in cheap suits and cowboy hats could be seen walking up and down the beach, squatting or standing still, cigarette in hand,

looking vaguely in one direction or another. Occasionally the jacket would come off, but few so much as took off their shoes and socks let alone rolled up their trouser legs. A bizarre group of holidaying Buddhist monks in their flamboyant orange robes and Nike footwear had a clearer idea of what fun at the seaside was all about however, taking and posing for photographs at the drop of a hat. But if, by and large, the Chinese don't know how to enjoy the actual beach, they certainly know how to enjoy their food and drink. As for me, I became completely addicted to Sanya's fresh coconut juice, almost to the exclusion of everything else on offer – although, maybe if the drinks menu had been as adventurous as the one recently sent me by a friend in Xiamen I might have been tempted to broaden my horizons a little: green bam ice sand; thick love; gray love; purple by chance; foam green sectioned bean paste; red powder bosom friend; acerbity green berry ice foam ... her list goes on.

The combined smell of barbecued seafood with gunpowder from the fireworks provides me with one of the most unforgettable memories of my short holiday. Not that the beach itself was a particularly relaxed place to be on New Year's Eve – it being jammed with locals and holiday makers setting off fireworks as though there were no tomorrow. No organization; nothing resembling safety; it was mayhem and actually quite scary. Why send a rocket into the sky when it might be more fun to direct it into the crowd? Why not give that toddler a Roman candle to play with? Light the blue touch paper and retire? No way!

But not all my travelling has been holiday orientated. Having convinced the International Baccalaureate Diploma Co-ordinator at my school that an expensive three-day general arts course in Adelaide would possibly not be money terribly well spent, I spent a couple of days shadowing an experienced IB music teacher in the garden city of Suzhou – an hour or so from Shanghai. For me, this hands-on experience is the very best sort of in-service training you can get, and I came back refreshed and enthused. Music is taken very seriously at my school, and there are performances of one sort or another every few weeks. Our Winter Show, for example, was in aid of a local AIDS orphanage, and what a great show it was. The choir sang beautifully, the orchestra gave as lively as possible a rendition of Mozart's "Sleigh Ride" (always a bit dreary that one – I had meant to bring Leroy Anderson's piece back to China with me) while, amongst the solo items, one of the students gave an absolutely stunning performance of "I Will Survive". Where were the talent scouts that night I wonder? Perhaps they were having a night off or had wandered into the city to see Richard Clayderman who was giving a one man show in Tianjin. Well, Mr. Clayderman, it has to be said, the International School has at least three pianists who, if there is such an expression, could play you under the table. And although none might have your bone structure, I reckon one of them at least could even give the likes of Lang Lang a run for his money in a year or two's time. Perhaps he will remember his old music teacher in the years to come. Who knows?

Although many of the changes over here have probably been for the best and though there is still much to captivate me, a lot of what I love about China is on its way out. And I don't just mean here in Tianjin. Although I had been to Suzhou twice before for example, I don't remember the place being quite as frantic as it seemed this time round. At least one of its famous gardens should be re-named, for it is no longer "The Garden for Lingering In", but, most emphatically, the garden

to get round as quickly as you possibly can so that you can escape before you are driven insane by the sounds of the competing megaphones. But I may just have the opportunity to be able to stem the flow a tiny bit. Back in Tianjin, I am very proud to be able to tell you that I have been asked to assist in the production of an official visitors guide – apparently I know more about the city than the average *Tianjinren* (local). Although I expect it will mean a reasonable amount of work, it is something I am happy to get my teeth into – even if, as I suspect, my fierce nostalgia for the city's past European greatness is likely to be watered down. Tianjin (or Tientsin as it was known then) still has plenty of British architecture in particular from the days when it played involuntary host to nine foreign concessions, and the city's present leaders really do need to be encouraged to promote this. What is Tianjin's identity after all? Is it more than a gritty industrial town? In my view it most certainly is and I will work hard to promote what it has to offer, whilst being careful not to overdo things. After all, in Tibet, the number of tourists now exceeds the resident population - a frightening statistic indeed. But despite the fact I love the place, somehow I don't think Tianjin is quite in the same league.

Shu nian hao!  
Happy Year of the Rat!

David