

FROM THE ZONE OF THE RICH

April 2008

Dear All

Having been in China for almost six years now, most of them in Tianjin, I felt it was about time to better myself and live somewhere rather more befitting my status. Not that there was anything particularly wrong with the apartment at *Huan Bohai* – apart from the fact that it was completely characterless and almost totally devoid of sunshine. But I felt I could, indeed should, live somewhere more suited to my station in life; the sort of address I could casually drop into conversation to be sure of attracting the admiration of the right sort of person. “Aristocrat Farm” perhaps? Not really what I had in mind. “It was the Best of Times” maybe ... except, of course, literary acquaintances would be bound to continue the quotation. What about “Society Hill”? - that certainly has a ring to it, but as I am at a total loss as to its whereabouts, Tianjin being built on a flood plain and thus completely flat, that was a non-starter. And as for “Original County” – well, memories of peasants being moved off land 100 yards or so from my school to allow this complex to grow even bigger and grander would certainly leave a nasty taste in the mouth and might even spoil my pre-prandials.

Although Tianjin’s current construction mania has resulted in many up-market building projects, in the end there was no real competition. For me, it simply had to be “Zone of the Rich” - a high-rise development of great splendour to the south of the city centre. And so that’s where I am right now; in a sunny, ground floor apartment with small garden front and rear, and surrounded, I assume, by Tianjin’s rich and famous. I have friends coming over this afternoon and we are going for a stroll around the fairly extensive grounds. Who knows how many beautiful people we will be rubbing shoulders with? And with the constantly saluting security guards, we might even begin to get delusions of grandeur ourselves. Of course we will have to shun the dozens of gardeners around the place – I am not joking when I say that a sizeable grove of trees (and I mean trees, not shrubs) has mysteriously appeared over the last twenty four hours - and make sure we look to the right rather than the left of the admonitory notice “No Dabble” next to the ornamental fountain (not yet filled) if we are to avoid the half dozen or so quilted tents where they live. Fortunately, from the luxury of my living room, (or do I mean drawing room?) I cannot see them as they would most surely spoil the view. If you have access to Google Earth you might try pasting in 39°03'11.24"N 117°12'40.04"E and having a quick look. And to think that as little as three or four years ago, all this was fish ponds, rice fields and peasant villages.



To the Manor Born?

But, I cannot go on in this vein indefinitely. Suffice to say it is with very mixed feelings indeed that I find myself living in what can only be described as opulence – with furnishings an unsubtle blend of glitzy Chinese and the Palace of Versailles. Not actually what I would choose myself, but definitely all set to provide a talking point for the next sixteen months – the length of my rental agreement.

My School was sort of helpful about the move, but I don't really think they wanted me to move away from those apartments they actually lease themselves. That the School feels responsible for us, as indeed all good employers should, is understandable and indeed welcome, but I find the degree of their paternalism more than a little claustrophobic at times. And little things niggle too. Had I chosen to move into premises the School had found, for example, they would have paid for my move - as it was I called on half a dozen friends and we did it between us. Furthermore, I was told that as I was opting out, I would have to deal with any problems with the landlord myself – which I still think is quite unnecessary considering the school has a dedicated “human resources manager” (how I hate that expression). But I knew all this in advance and so far there have been no regrets whatsoever.

One of my first purchases for the new place was a humidifier. Northern China in general and, perhaps, Tianjin in particular, is extraordinarily dry at the moment and until recently I have been waking up with the sort of sore throat that, back home, would have ended up in a cold. Dry air, I thought, so promptly bought myself a cheap solution. The local electrical shop had four or five models and I chose the orangey-brown one shaped like a monkey as being the least tacky. The green one was in the form of a monstrous frog, the black and white one like a grotesque hybrid between a panda and a rabbit ...

and so on. I filled it up, switched it on and woke up the next morning as right as rain. Curious when you consider I had not actually plugged it in.

Although I am now living further away from the city centre than previously, I am still within a short bus ride of the Sheraton Hotel where I continue to swim a couple of times a week, and where I can stock up on over-priced western goods or indulge myself in the sauna and spa pool. I also continue to go to Xikai Cathedral when they have their English language services. Although there is generally a pretty good crowd there anyway, on Easter Day the place was jam packed – maybe three-quarters Chinese (one assumes English speaking) and the rest obviously foreign. I have always liked Xikai and was delighted when it re-opened for business on a fairly regular basis. In recent months though, I developed an even closer affinity for the place when I discovered that the father of a friend of mine in Dorset had designed some of its original stained glass windows. Oliver Moore's father was a stained glass craftsman and family records show an A L Moore single light window as having been installed in 1914, with a two light window a few years later. Moore also designed a bronze war memorial tablet. Although I was certain that the memorial would have long disappeared, I was really hoping the windows might still be intact. But of course, they were gone, in all probability destroyed during the Cultural Revolution if not earlier, and replaced by a group of saintly figures in what I suspect is heavy duty sticky-backed plastic. However, there is just a slim chance that the originals may have been stolen rather than destroyed and be in someone's house in one of the more prestigious streets of Tianjin. And with Tianjin's architectural heritage becoming increasingly well known, someone might just have come across the "ALM" signature in the bottom right corner and recognised the windows for what they once were. I have a couple of friends in relatively high places these days so I have not given up all hope.

Without wishing to cause family and friends back home undue alarm, there are definite signs that China's vast underclass is stirring. I have spoken already about the disturbing scenes literally within spitting distance of my school where local people were and probably still are being removed from their land to enable the continuing expansion of "Original County". My old stamping ground of Shenzhen in fact, once a pilot area for the introduction of a market economy, now has one of the worst records for industrial unrest in the country – hardly surprising when you consider that more than 50% of the workforce do not get a regular weekly day off. There is also trouble in connection with land seizure for the Olympic Games – something that the Olympic torch protestors are possibly not aware of. Protesting under the slogan "We don't want Olympics, we want human rights!" several activists have reportedly been put under house arrest.

Although the disturbances in Tibet, Qinghai, Sichuan and some of the other western provinces in China have, I am told, been well documented in the western media, there has been little in the way of any *peaceful* protesting shown on CCTV9, the Chinese state English language channel, where most of the coverage has consisted of scenes of looting and violence. However, there has been only a half-hearted attempt to black out the likes of BBC World or Youtube – possibly because the Chinese authorities have come to realise that such heavy handedness inevitably results in bad press from the

rest of the world.

There is no doubt that those members of China's ethnic groups that I know are tremendously proud of their roots – be it the young Uighur guy I meet over coffee here in Tianjin from time to time, the family from Inner Mongolia with whom I am close friends and who were instrumental in finding my new apartment, or the students from the Tibetan school in Qinghai Province with which my school is unofficially twinned. There is also no doubt in my mind that it is China's rather heavy-handed attempts to create a single (Han) cultural identity that has caused what seems to be the current revitalisation of pride in their ethnicity. At a time when the eyes of the world are focused on Beijing, it is hardly surprising that many of them are becoming vocal. For even in the ethnic schools, the dominant culture that is taught is that of the Han Chinese, the youngsters themselves learning little of their own history or culture. Inevitably, of course, most of my Chinese friends are Han themselves and it is a sad fact that, despite their many wonderful qualities, many of them, possibly even the majority, see members of the minority groups as second-rate citizens and simply cannot understand their lack of positive response to what they see as the “utopia of modernity” as I have heard it called. For despite years of communism, your average Chinaman is a modern capitalist through and through. He will speak of the railway line into Lhasa as “opening it up” - the Tibetan sees it as yet more erosion, invasion even, of his national identity. And things don't stop there, for all too often, what the Han might see as preserving the minority culture is little more than a veneer anyway. Buddhist monasteries, for example, are primarily reconstructed not for prayer but as tourist attractions, and even those that are working monasteries display communist propaganda. “Have the same heart as the Party ... follow the same direction as socialism ... be grateful and dedicate yourself to the motherland” – that sort of thing.

Lhasa itself, of course, is almost literally snowed under with tourists these days – or at least it was until a few weeks ago. Now, I gather, the whole of Tibet is closed to visitors which must make a real difference, perhaps even a welcome one - the daily train from Beijing alone carrying upwards of four thousand people – most of them settlers or holiday-makers. A friend told me of a magazine picture he had seen of praying monks in the foreground with the new bullet train speeding across in the background. A striking image I am sure but one which puts me in a terrible dilemma. I long to go back to Tibet (my previous trip was cut short by SARS) and I love travelling by train; but, when the Olympic business has all blown over, as it most surely will, do I really want to revisit somewhere that will either have been swamped by Han Chinese or, what is possibly worse, turned into some vast museum? I don't honestly think I do.

Despite unrest, inequality and the general unfairness of daily life, all is not doom and gloom, and one welcome sign of China's increased affluence has been the amount of money it is spending on the arts – certainly in terms of buildings and arts education. Most if not all of China's provincial cities are building new museums, concert halls, theatres and galleries, while a staggering twenty million youngsters are said to be learning the piano, ten million the violin, and the conservatoires are bulging at the seams. Experience suggests that a lot of the music making is likely to be showy,

bashed-out virtuosity, a bit like the buildings themselves, perhaps, but with numbers of this magnitude, the west can certainly look forward to an invasion of truly gifted virtuosi, and probably before the decade is out.

And it's not all one-way either. Tesco – the number one British supermarket chain - has put in an appearance here in Tianjin, although actually paying a visit is a treat (sic) in store, and I have lost count of the number of branches there are of KFC, McDonalds, Starbucks and the like. The Airbus consortium is investing heavily in the Tianjin Economic Development Area (TEDA) with the prospect of an additional eighty or so students likely to register at my school this coming September, while, rather sadly perhaps, western faces are no longer the curiosity they once were. But despite these signs of progress, Tianjin at least remains resolutely Chinese, Chinglish is alive and well, and, most days at least, I reflect on my good fortune at being here and being witness to it all. Where else, for example, could you receive an invitation to a wedding at precisely 4.28 p.m. or leave a restaurant with a complimentary bar of soap? Knowing a little about Chinese customs this latter still puzzles me. After all, in China, you never give anyone scissors as a present – they signify the severing of a relationship, or a fan – that is the equivalent dismissing them with a wave of the hand, or indeed a clock – which is a warning to the recipient that his or her days are numbered. I wonder what sort of message was being delivered by the bar of soap? Maybe someone should have a discreet word with me before too long?

So although, at times, I do get a bit nostalgic about the China I first knew, there is still much to enjoy, and while there is a lot of truth in the saying that one can never enter the same river twice, deep down I am not all that sure that I would really want to anyway. So how will I be enjoying myself this evening? Well, after my friends leave I will probably be off to a nearby restaurant – maybe to try a “grilled lank chap” or “special grandmother naked eye” and then it will be back to Zone of the Rich and a DVD. I recently bought what could well turn out to be a dramatic reworking of Ernest Hemingway's “The Old Man and the Sea” – entitled “The Old Man and the SAE”. I am intrigued.

David

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