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A VISIT TO CHINA

This piece was written as a direct response to my personal thoughts and feelings whilst travelling in China. It is a kind of *haibun* - prose interspersed with poetry written during a journey through part of Eastern China in 2017. It is not about politics or economics, it is strictly about some of the thoughts and feelings I had in the country as directly experienced. There can be a great difference between an unfiltered direct experience of a people and culture, and the knowledge arising from social, historical and political analyses.

I first came upon, and discovered a fascination for Chinese Ideas, when I was a student at Pembroke College, Cambridge University, in 1968. I was not studying anything remotely to do with China, nor did I know very much in particular about it (except what its capital was and its population), and nor did I have any particular input from my family concerning China. My father was born in India, where my mother also lived for a while when an infant; my father was fascinated with Africa, whilst my mother was with Italy, Greece, and many other parts of the world. No one had fed into me any particular charge of philosophical, cultural, or aesthetic enchantment with China. I just saw a book about the three main philosophical, or religious, or spiritual fountains that had together fed China for nearly three thousand years in Pembroke College Library: Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, and about how they had combined and intertwined in Chinese history and culture over such a vast extent of time. These three “spiritual” and “moral” traditions of Chinese Civilization expressed a strong tendency towards mutual tolerance, interaction, and interlockingness, except during phases of mainly state-directed, violence. I found that extraordinarily fascinating.

Our first days in Beijing were quite extraordinary and unforgettable. The pretty, friendly, smiling waitresses, so helpful, patient, and delightful, reminded me all the time of the young concubines, maids and serving girls depicted in many traditional Chinese paintings;- so nimble, delicate and elegant, so artistic and subtle in their bearing and expression. Later, outside the Shaanxi History Museum in Xian we met a charming and beautiful Chinese girl called Candace, who had lived in New York and spoke very good English. We talked about many things concerning China and at one point my wife Nidia said Candace looked much younger than 29 which she had said she was. I said, “Well, all Chinese girls look young,” to which Candace replied: “Yes, people often say Asian girls always look young.”

These things mingle in memory with the Art, especially the hallucinogenic bronzes, ceramics, porcelain and statuary of the Shang, Chou, Han and Tang Dynasties; and with the sense of peaceful tranquillity rendered in paintings of and about scholar-poets, drinking rice wine from bowls, soaking into mountain mists, loving their calligraphy, their pictographic words, and their brush strokes – in a quietness still maintained today even in the busy but not extremely noisy *hutongs* of central Beijing; and the lovely food, the clear blue sky of Beijing's September: these will remain for me, I hope, like so many Chan Buddhist moments of the 'Eternal Now', Enlightenment, *jetzt-zeiten*, "forever".

After Beijing, we took a rapid-train ride to Xian, through countryside that at first was disorganized and untidy, with high tower-blocks of apartments randomly breaking up the apparently unattended land in an ugly fashion. Gradually the countryside came to seem more orderly and cultivated, and the designs, forms, spacing, and conditions of the apartment buildings started to seem more tidy and aesthetic.

Shortly after arriving in Xian, we went, as no doubt nearly all visitors do, to see the Terracotta Army of the first Qin Emperor. Seeing this is like an hallucination without taking any drug or stimulant. The thousands of amazingly modelled soldiers, so exact in uniforms that register rank and weapons, each with distinct faces, nothing standardized, is nothing short of mind-boggling. The idea of this Emperor ordering and overseeing such an enormous task from 226 BC until his death, for the purpose of defending him from his enemies after his death is uniquely extraordinary. Of course it follows traditions - not unique to China – of planning the tomb of a deceased ruler to ensure his survival in the Afterlife, but this is surely on an utterly amazing scale.

It made me wonder whether the Emperor really believed that terracotta soldiers could protect him or his soul after he died, and if so in what ways; and still more whether his courtiers, and especially the artists and craftsmen who made the model soldiers, really shared any such beliefs that their Emperor might have held. Such beliefs appear today as exceedingly childish: the whole thing reminds me of when I was a child and believed that the toy animals, teddy-bears, and assorted "fighters" that I kept under my bed at night – including the handle of a hammer that I called Dong – could fight off devils who might approach my bed at night. Nevertheless, however "childish" the conception might seem, the organization of the Qin Empire was anything but childish, its Emperor terrifyingly powerful in the most earthly ways.

Seeing the fantastic works in especially the Chinese National Museum in Beijing, the Shaanxi History Museum in Xian, and the Shanghai Museum of Art – the most stupendous museums imaginable – re-aroused in me a set of conjectures I have held for a very long time. These concern the thought that shamanism, itself originally connected with magical hallucinogenic inputs into the mind from plants, was/is central to the imaginative, religious, and spiritual history and culture of East Asia, especially of China and Siberia. It is clear that the major influxes of Oriental Asians across the Bering Straits into what Europe much later came to call the "New World", around 15 to 10 thousand years ago – the exact timings are always given to intense debate – must have brought "styles" of thought and art with them. Can the same "deep psyche" of East Asia and Amerindia not be seen in designs, stelae, horrific carvings, imaginary animals, hybrids, man-animals and so much more in China and in North American carved Totem poles, Mayan art, pre-Inca and Inca art and

design, and the hallucinogenic textile patterns of many Central and South American indigenous groups?

After seeing the Moslem Quarter of Xian – in which the ancient mosque astonishes with its Chinese architecture, and its Taoist and Buddhist kind of temple-world - we wandered through the old, narrow shopping streets which are like hybrids between a Middle-Eastern bazaar and Chinese *Hutong*. Soon after that we flew to Guilin, and while there we took a boat trip along the River Li to Hangzhou, through stupendous karst scenery, mountains with extraordinary shapes and peaks. The Tang poet Yan Hu wrote these lines, presumably on a bright moonlit night:

“The river winds like a blue silk ribbon,
While the hills erect like green jade hairpins.”

And I wrote this:

GUILIN (IN A RESTAURANT WITH MY WIFE)

“My poem cannot be a replica:
The River Li flows and swims as a blue silky moon
Like sorrow and pain, and then back.
The huge high green karsts erect to the skies forever;
What changes with the Autumn winds?”

We also went on a night boat on Lake Shan – to the plaintiff sound of a woman playing a traditional Chinese single-stringed instrument, and rode past a wonderful spectacle of girls dancing in traditional form, arms above their heads as they revolved.

From Guilin we flew to Hong Kong, where one is immediately struck by the differences between “The Mainland” and Hong Kong. The very term “Mainland”, used in the South China Morning News, suggests that the people of Hong Kong don’t really feel part of the “Mainland”, no matter how much they know they are Chinese. A hundred years under British Colonial rule resulted in their feeling different. The guide who met us at the airport and took us to our hotel said he felt both Hong Kong and Chinese, but a waiter serving us with delicious food a day or so later said he would be happy if Hong Kong was ruled by Britain for another 500 years! Both had lived a good while in Peru in the first case and California in the second.

Public sculpture in Hong Kong is rougher and more avant-garde than that which one sees in mainland China; popular music in the People’s Republic is not so frenetic as in Hong Kong, even though the country is just as crowded. (I am speaking here of course of those parts of Eastern China that we visited). There seemed to be in this main part of China less Western music than in Hong Kong, though there is plenty of Western-influenced music, though that is there in Hong Kong as well. It is interesting that one of the earliest Western popular musicians that was invited to perform in China was Jean-Michel Jarre, whose music is exciting, but also gentle and tranquil, rather as watching Chinese girl dancers in traditional costumes, movements, and facial expressions is.

The music in Hong Kong streets is not necessarily Western, but closer to it. The streets felt in some sense more frantic. The buses remind you of London even though they are different – twenty years after the “handing back”. A bus station we could see from a restaurant window looked as boring as one in London. If many Hong Kong people are a bit afraid of being “taken over” by China proper, the latter is wary of tendencies that might emanate from Hong Kong which could be disturbing to its nature and being. The Chinese versions of rock, folk, romantic love songs, or jazzy background music, in “Mainland” China, lack the urgency somehow, the up-to-the-hilt emotionality (and indeed at times ferocity) of Western music. But it is not dull, not *kitsch*, not de-adrenalized or de-intensified. It is of Chinese culture/civilization, a different thing from European and neo-European cultures/civilizations. China is different from the West! Not the raw, hard edges of the Blues, Jimi Hendrix, or Wagner. Much softer.

An extraordinary sense of calm, serenity, politeness and self-control predominates in China, in spite of huge crowds walking across enormous complex spaces, squares, hotel and other lobby areas, and the great activity and pushy schedules.

From Hong Kong we flew to Hangzhou, the Capital of the Southern Sung Dynasty.

The very picturesque and piquant names and expressions from both ancient and modern China, are so striking. Such as Mao-tse-Tung’s “Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom”; in Hangchow’s West Lake there are the “Three Pavilions That Mirror The Moon”. One Hangchow local beer is called “West Lake Green Rain Beer”, whilst another place in West Lake is called “Lotus in the Breeze at Crooked Courtyard”. Pang Chunmei, one of the favourite concubines of Ximen Qing in the late 16th century novel by Langlin Xiaoxiao Sheng, is called “Spring Plum Blossoms”. Hong Kong means “Island of Perfumes”, Kowloon means “Nine Dragons”.

On the banks of West Lake, shortly after it had become dark, the Leifeng Pagoda lit up, and the reflections of that light twinkled their way in ripples to the shore, whilst an old-style red lantern lit up a Taros tree, so that its falling kind of night-green dark tent shone upon branches in front of us. Now we could have been in Classical times, pre-electricity, when light at night came from flaming torches or oil lamps, and a boat like a gondola or giant moth might arrive at the shore where the Emperor waited, accompanied by his delicate courtesans. These are some of my responses:

“I take up my bowl,
And the wine unites me with the essence of Nature
As I follow the Tao into the essence of Truth;
The spirit of Reality is what I pursue
With my brush-strokes, in painting, or poetry.”

This was inspired by Yua Tu, a Tang Dynasty poet:

A FOUNTAIN AND LIGHT SPECTACULAR AT OHANGZHOU

“The splendour of existence
The gratitude for being
Beauty exudes from the visions of essence
Between reality and imagination.”

WEST LAKE

“I see a peach-colour lovely light
Somewhat hazy like a misty cloud
Here there is so much delicious air
Girls that turn to you with sweet smiles and care
This is the turn of beautiful dream
Around a Lake that is soaked with millennia of wonder
Here I feel I join again
My real love, Nidia, my delicious one.

I see Elephants, with enormous mouths,
Dragons, making out their teeth so strange
Their tails are absolutely turning to the North,
Here we know where we are, or not?”

Misty willows and painted bridges retain thousands of years of lingering nostalgia; the shape of Shang bronze spoons is the same as modern plastic restaurant ladles; politeness as one of the highest of moral virtues in civilized society is as ubiquitous today as ever. China has been/is culturally continuous though punctuated periodically by long gaps of disorder. Order restored, it has been, and is again being rebuilt culturally and physically, down to streets, shops, entertainment areas, and everything else.

“I was swimming
Through the dark
I was swimming
In the deepest dark
I was that
I was awaiting
Enlightenment!
In Chinese Art!

Now I feel the *qi*, and see the Spirit in the Tao of Nature
Wherever it moves, and how its essence flows
Enigmatically and ambiguously everywhere.
Ah! Is not Southern Sung Landscape Painting among the greatest Art ever?
“Soundless poems” are the Divine Creation of the Tao
Working its Way through the Artist’s Mind
As it tells the hand how to render Nature

For Nature itself to enjoy.”

Everything in China seems absolutely orderly, and without that, chaos would reign. People obviously not only realize that, but have no inclination to go against it anyway, for Taoist, Confucian, Buddhist, and even Maoist reasons. And for good reason: look at the thousands of huge tower blocks, sky-scrapers, with millions of people living in apartments in peace! There is peace, solidarity, kindness, happiness (insofar as that is possible for humanity). There is freedom of thought about a great deal – police or soldiers do not invade your small gathering out of the blue. Things get blacked out periodically on the television when they are obviously “difficult” for the government – for example when we were looking at a TV report about an Interpol official from Hong Kong who had suddenly disappeared in China. But one does not feel regimented by people in uniform as in some other countries – the police and army seem very friendly, helpful, and polite. If you talk to people about political prisoners and things like that, they don’t want to respond, - that is clear. But in general people speak very happily and freely, indeed smilingly, about nearly everything. This feels a lovely country: Nidia and I adore China.

THE NYMPH OF THE LUO RIVER: GU KAISHI: COMMUNICATION OF THE SOUL

“Wind blows gently across, and the river
Drifts vigorously along, so vividly and dramatically.
A perfect visual poetic story is created
Combining reality with imagination.
The Nymph of the Luo River is on the other side
Of the river. The Poet could see her but not touch her;
All is for him lingering and in despair. The Nymph seems to walk
Slowly over clouds and ripples, so elegantly and romantically.”

From Hangzhou we went again by rapid train to Shanghai. Apart from the fantastic Shanghai Museum of Art, I was most stunned by the view out from the window of our hotel room on the 16th floor. At night I looked for hours upon dozens of immense, tall, apartment buildings, their lights twinkling crazily all night. Here were the residences of many hundreds of thousands of people within one’s sight. Looking down, far down, one could see the many-laned streets, driven along, in perfect silence as it seemed from our room, at even speed by cars and other vehicles hour after hour, absolutely perfectly disciplined as it seemed to us so high up. Something like this has existed for millennia, and it is part of and affects culture and behaviour.

How terrible was the behaviour of the British in 19th Century China, as was also that of France, the United States, other Western Powers, then also Japan. They took advantage of the protracted collapse of the Ching Dynasty; China in its long hours of suffering and disaster, and exploited the great warmth and predominantly easy-going nature of the Chinese people, which Westerners can now feel and know so easily. The standard Western criticisms and condemnations of post “Communist” Revolutionary China in the light of their own earlier actions, has been and still is immense hypocrisy. The “Opium Wars” waged by Britain to force China to accept the import of

opium, such that large numbers of Chinese became abject addicts of the drug, was utterly criminal.

Chinese history is all about the rise and fall of dynasties, with periods of chaos, conflict, and war in between. The 14th C novelist Luo Ben wrote: "They say the momentum of history was ever thus: the empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide." Mao-tse-Tung founded the latest dynasty. Each time the past is recreated in new forms, literally. You can see this in the streets of Hangzhou that was destroyed many times and has now been recreated in recent decades. This has not been mere replication; such has constantly recurred over centuries in Chinese history.