

CHANGING CHINA, CHANGING LIFE

A Journey of Discovery

Gary J. Hawkins

To Yu,
A shining star amongst a billion staring faces.

Changing China, Changing Life
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INTRODUCTION

Everybody in Fifteenth Century Spain was wrong about where China was and as a result, Columbus discovered Caribbean vacations.

- P.J. O'Rourke, 'Parliament of Whores'

There comes a point in almost everyone's life when your world seems in crisis. I found myself in such circumstances around Christmas, 1994; everything had gone wrong. I had been separated from my wife for over two years. My subsequent long-term relationship also lay in tatters. To compound matters even further, I had recently been made redundant. That was the last straw. I never thought it could happen to me - I paid a high price indeed for one too many burned bridges.

With little left to hold onto in England, I accepted a consultancy position in America. I was running; running from memories and crushed ambitions. I needed space and an opportunity to start again.

Crisis by itself though, does not drive one to write a book, and without a doubt, this tome started by accident. It took life after reading the diary of a lifelong friend, Mrs. Ryan. She handed me a pad of immaculately handwritten notes as we drank tea one afternoon during the Yuletide holidays. Their clarity and the images they evoked of the sleepy hamlet where I had grown up were amazing. I was excited and envisioned turning her vivid descriptions of this microcosm of Edwardian England into a biography. Mrs. Ryan appeared keen, and I was sure I could make something of it.

Lacking literary experience, I decided on a practice run. An obvious subject beckoned: my forthcoming trip to China to visit my brother, Andrew. Andrew was an English teacher in the country he became fascinated with after two visits in the late Eighties. In 1990 he was invited to teach at a technical institute on the Yangzi River. From there he moved to He Hai University, Changzhou, and worked at a key primary

school in the same city. I didn't understand why he had chosen to live this way - it certainly wasn't for the financial rewards. From his many letters it was clear this was far from a comfortable life, and on his occasional visits back home our conversations never shed any light on the matter.

I had journeyed widely in North America and Europe, but this was my first trip to the East. I'd promised Andrew many times that I would visit and was acutely aware that after my arrival in the United States the chance to take another long vacation would disappear. China offered the prospect of venturing well off the tourist track, which appeals to one with an adventuring soul and a roving camera. I imagined sitting on The Great Wall, one of humanity's greatest physical achievements, surrounded by its majesty, alone in my solitude. Perhaps, the answer to my future would materialize - if not there, then where else?

Upon my return to England, I found that fate had changed the game plan. Mrs. Ryan had become nervous about the biography, and sadly the project died as quickly as it had begun. However, I had fourteen hours of dictated notes from my China trip, and when these were transcribed, I realized greater possibilities existed. Thoughts of a brief travelogue evaporated - I now dreamt of a book of emotions and considered reflection. Not only would it cover the places visited, and people met, but it would also chart a myriad of impressions etched in my mind and touch some of the deep-rooted issues running through my life.

You will find that the narrative is spontaneous, and sometimes naive or misguided. However, I hope it captures the moment, the instantaneous perception of an unknown country and a new being. I aim to conjure up the images and atmosphere that I experienced so that you may gain a deeper insight into the country that I became so attached to in such a short space of time. In addition to my recollections, I have added a selection of poetry that Andrew has written. These poems strikingly portray his image of China and add an alternative view of how this virile country is being molded by time.

Dear Reader

My desire is to write, write a book
And this book would be thick as thick as an ox
Illuminating as silk the body curving below.
Now thick is easy
Anyone can type with conviction and gibberish pound
But the book would be thick
As silk? Illuminating the body below
A true challenge, mine to meet with ability or conceit

And so I'd instruct
"Within, find knowledge profound"
Though such claim if not premature is indeed somewhat unsure.
But if not for this, why write, what to say?
For modesty - the modest don't write
For posterity - perhaps luckily paper flakes
While duty (that foul institute)
Beginning with "D" the Devil's disguise.
Therefore, I say direct, I say bold
"Within find knowledge profound - not old"
And wish, in vain hope, it be the first
Before the Greek and Chinese
As the first, by fame or infamy
You shall quote or correct
And so, carry the light of the sage.

What

What is poetry?
What a stupid question!
Do you want me to write a book?

What is poetry?
But the ravings of the demented half crazed.
A reflection of love
And the ephemeral to which words grasp.

A PLANE FULL OF WESTERNERS!

Airplane travel is nature's way of making you look like your passport photo.

— Al Gore, U.S. Vice President

It's with some trepidation that I head up the M4 toward Heathrow Airport. It's a typical English day; damp and grey as if the troubles of the world hang on its shoulders. The wipers flick back and forth, brushing aside oval raindrops. As usual, the traffic is heavy. I'm destined to catch the 9:30 am flight to Beijing. From there, I have an internal flight to Nanjing and then a three-hour train journey to my final destination of Changzhou. I expect to be traveling for about twenty-hours! Hopefully, when I arrive in Nanjing, I'll meet up with Andrew. The thought of a solitary train journey worries me.

I'm not clear whether I fully understand my relationship with Andrew. As children we were always at each other's throats; like cat and dog, we took every opportunity to fight. I sometimes wonder how our Mother did not go spare. As teenagers the conflicts subsided, but sibling rivalry was ever present. Andrew had to content himself with playing second fiddle as I swept through a Naval apprenticeship and then university. Even when he got accepted to the University of Warwick, he never made the spotlight until he surprised everyone with an honors degree. When I got married and left home our relationship improved, although I'm sure this was mainly associated with how infrequently we saw each other. Now, at best, we meet once a year when he's back home visiting. He has strong ideas, is well read and will comment on any subject, whether informed or not; this sometimes infuriates my parents and, in particular, my Father. They will argue for hours; Andrew justifying a cause for the sake of it rather than because of any specific conviction. While I suspect the time we're going to spend together will be successful, nagging doubts hang in the back of my mind. At least he seems excited about my visit.

The drive is uneventful, and I amuse myself by listening to music, tapping out a rhythmic beat to the likes of Queen and Supertramp. The traffic eases approaching the airport, but I miss the entrance to the car park at Terminal Three; this causes a fifteen-minute delay before I manage to get in on the second attempt. I unload my luggage and head into the departure building.

Heathrow Airport is always busy and today is no exception. A shock awaits me when I arrive at the Air China check-in desks. I was expecting to find Chinese all lined up; instead, ninety-five percent of the people are English, and most of these are senior citizens to boot. I suspect they're together on a package tour. My romantic illusion of flying out as a lone traveler amidst a plane full of foreigners is shattered somewhat.

I sit, drink coffee and read for a while, safe in the knowledge that I have checked in, and all is well. It's difficult to know what I expect from this trip. I have perused the *China - Travel Survival Kit*, published by Lonely Planet Publications (referred to as the LPG throughout the rest of this book), which is considered by many to be the backpackers' bible. It is a fascinating read, if for no other reason than the travel horror stories it describes. Now it nestles snugly in my sports bag, ready for further inspection on the plane. My elderly traveling companions are dressed as if they're going to Florida. They wear casual summer clothes, in stark contrast to my heavy jeans, wool shirt, Barbour jacket and walking boots. Are they on the right flight? Do they know where they're going? Do I realize where I'm going? I still have vivid memories of the 1989 student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square that were plastered across the television at the time. I know from Andrew's letters that living in China is a challenge - the rest of my somewhat stereotypical view of the country comes from films and the occasional documentary.

By my usual standards, I'm traveling light - everything is packed into a fifty-five-liter rucksack and my sports bag. In addition to the LPG, I have a meager amount of clothes, a Dictaphone, medicines, camera equipment, a set of wood carving tools (stipulated in Andrew's last letter), a large wedge of Christmas cake (Mother thought it was a good idea) and reading material for Andrew. He requested all sorts of books on English teaching and I spent a hectic couple of afternoons seeking advice on something suitable. For some reason, he also wanted a book on old bicycles dating back to the 19th Century. As Andrew's stuff takes up half of my luggage, I'll have plenty of room to bring back souvenirs.

With an hour to go I head for Departure Gate 25. I have no real problem going through security, although as usual I manage to get body searched. I think I must have a plate or pin somewhere that somebody neglected to tell me about. The metal detector always goes off, no matter how many coins, keys, and belt-buckles I hand over. There is no time for tax-free shopping, and I go straight to the waiting area.

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Boarding begins promptly, and soon I'm pushing up the aisleway along with everyone else.

The non-stop flight is nine hours and forty minutes and covers a total distance of five thousand two hundred miles. From London, the plane heads out over Holland, Germany, Poland and the former Soviet Union, keeping fairly much north. Then we will proceed down across Mongolia before crossing into China. We should arrive in Beijing at about 6 pm London time. The plane is one of the smaller jumbo jets, and it's packed to the gills, mainly with the tour party I saw earlier.

The flight holds no great surprises; it's another typical transcontinental experience, long and tedious. Most of the passengers attempt to sleep, a few watch the movies which, while American, have a Chinese feel about them - most of the villains are Oriental. As the plane thunders relentlessly into the encircling darkness, the cabin crew whip around with dinner at a pace that seems entirely out of sympathy with the duration of the journey. A group of students finds a cache of red wine in the galley: several are now feeling its effect and sleep sprawled out wherever they can. They will probably be nursing hefty hangovers in the morning.

By 1:50 pm GMT the dawn breaks and light seeps through the windows. Within half an hour the sun has risen fully, illuminating the fluffy cloud base below. The elderly couple next to me has kept to themselves. We made polite conversation for a while but then they curled up under blankets oblivious to the rest of the world. That suits me, I feel strangely out of place, and my thoughts are elsewhere.

God, I hope that this journey marks the beginning of something new. I know when I return to England, I'll almost immediately leave for America. This should be the start of a fresh chapter in my life, a chance to break away from the past that seems to have turned so sour.

Things really started to change eighteen months ago, when for reasons that seemed perfectly justifiable at the time my eleven-year marriage to Gina broke up. We married when I was just nineteen; she was a year older. We were childhood sweethearts - the stuff of fairy tales. We were the first of our peer group to tie the knot and flourished in our world of mutual support. I made it through university and Gina forged a career in administration. Like every couple, we had our ups and downs, but we coped and plowed relentlessly forward. Life treated us and our fellow DINKIES¹ well, and the comforts of success came quickly.

The tide began to ebb as we approached our thirties; we became distant and eventually reached the point where even insignificant upsets turned into heated arguments. We allowed ourselves to grow apart, slowly but surely falling into the

¹ DINKIES - Couples falling into the demographic category of, 'Dual income, no kids.'

trap of leading our own lives. I quickened the end for sure, firstly by refusing to seek counseling (a mistake I've come to regret) and then by getting involved in another relationship. The clock was ticking, and soon the timebomb exploded, destroying all that we had worked for.

Following our separation, my world recovered more quickly than Gina's. I had found someone special; Gina struggled to come to terms with being alone for the first time in her life. In time Gina fought the anguish and surprised me with her strength; she too found another to share her life. Despite everything that has happened, we remain close, talk often and share the trials and tribulations of these different times. Our friends continue to be confused as to why the break-up happened and how we maintain such an affinity even though we're no longer together. For myself, I could have died a thousand times for what I put her through. I still find the guilt difficult to live with. I realize now I should have fought harder to save a relationship which at one time seemed so perfect.

Initially, my new relationship blossomed. We fed off similar strengths of forceful ambition, deep respect and a zest for life. Slowly though, these same strengths became enemies. Working so closely together in the same company took its toll as we fought for what we felt was right from opposing departments. Also, my new partner couldn't come to terms with my continued friendship with Gina. I wouldn't let go of this - I owed this much to someone to whom I'd been married to for so long. Understandably, I guess, my girlfriend did not see it in these terms. Wedges were again being driven into place. The end was signaled by my redundancy. I looked for another position, and with our commitment faltering, accepted a job abroad.

Now I'm alone with just the memories of two failed relationships. I don't feel sorry for myself. I took action that I believed to be right; the results, however, have not matched up with the expectations. I made an error in judgment about not fighting harder to save my marriage, and now I must live with the consequences and pray my actions have not caused irreparable hurt.

The plane touches down at 1:40 pm local time, the temperature as reported by our captain is zero degrees centigrade. As we taxi towards the terminal buildings I'm struck by the sight of bicycles crossing the runway - they head in all directions. Where else in the world would you see this? Most of the parked aircraft display the Air China logo; there seem to be few international carriers. The plane draws to a halt, we collect our belongings and head out onto the frozen tarmac. The bus trip across to the main terminal is crowded, perhaps giving me my first taste of the claustrophobia of future journeys. After handing in my quarantine and entry forms, passport control is a formality.

Outside the terminal building, the air temperature feels nothing like freezing, it's warm, sunny and pleasant. The airport is much like any other, with polished

concourses, endless plate glass windows, busy check-in desks and rows of eager taxis waiting outside. The only apparent differences here are the Chinese signs and the crowds of Chinese themselves. Cars continually pull up, picking up and dropping off passengers. They're typical of those you would see in any developed country: Toyotas, Audis, Mercedes - in fact, most are higher end makes. There are also many jeeps and, of course, bicycles. The tour party from our plane congregates and is hastily organized into five groups. One hundred and eighty people wander off in some confusion toward their buses. They're heading for Beijing, a first night's rest and excursions the following day.

The twenty or so students from the plane also gather. I learned that they're here on the Gap Program to undertake a six-month teaching assignment before returning to their respective universities in England. Two are heading to the city of Suzhou, just beyond my destination. A further two to the outskirts of Shanghai and two more to Shanghai itself; the rest will scatter throughout China.

Almost an hour passes while I watch the hustle and bustle. I shall soon have to make my way back inside to sort things out for the following stage of the journey. The first adventure is going to be changing money at the Foreign Exchange Counter² - then I must find the departure gate for Nanjing.

The money exchange proceeds without a problem, although I come across the concept of a 'Chinese queue' for the first time. Basically, there isn't one, just a mass of pushing people! Following the example of those around, I too fight for attention at whichever opening seems to offer the shortest delay. In the departure lounge, the concept of queueing, appears to have been reinstated - most of the lines for the check-ins are quite orderly.

While waiting, I observe a slightly built youth, pushing a loaded trolley, knock into a man sitting down. Words are spoken, and the levels of their voices increase. Then, without warning, the youth lashes out at the sitting man. His first blow, delivered with the elegance of a kickboxer, is accurate and the man recoils in pain. I stand there dumbfounded; no one else seems to take much notice. The downed man does not attempt to get up - further words are spoken. Again, the youth appears poised to strike, but he doesn't, and the incident subsides.

With check-in complete, I head to the departure gate. No other white faces are present, and people stare intently. Men crowd the smoking area; a thick haze hangs across the room. I light a cigarette and am oppressively aware of the stares that I receive. Less than comfortable here, I soon move to the lobby where the extra space brings relief, although the attention from my fellow travelers doesn't diminish.

² The exchange rate at the time was approximately £1 = 13 yuan = \$1.47 US.

The flight to Nanjing more closely matches my expectations, a plane full of Chinese, mine the only white face. Now I feel like an adventuring traveler. When boarding the plane, I got the distinct impression that if people here want to get from A to B and you're in their way, you're in serious trouble! Several times I was almost knocked over as hand luggage is stowed; people move from one seat to another with carefree abandon.

We arrive in Nanjing around 7:10 pm. Andrew is there to meet me - what a relief! We shake hands for the first time in eight months. He's dressed in a thick sweater, jeans, and a functional green jacket. My brother is two years my junior, although he looks older because of his rapidly receding hairline and weathered features. As usual, he wears that distinctive smile on his squarely set jaw, which supports a scruffy 'goatee' beard. Like me he's of medium build; he may have lost a little weight - his face is thinner than I remember.

Andrew is not alone. His companion greets me with an outstretched hand before hurriedly turning in the direction of the entrance.

"We have to drive to Changzhou, there were no suitable trains," Andrew explains.

"That's a blessing; I wasn't looking forward to the train," I reply.

"One of the parents kindly arranged for the use of a car and driver," he continues.

"How long will the journey take?"

"Oh, about three hours."

That doesn't make much sense, by my reckoning we only have seventy-five miles to go. However, I am too tired to question further as we head out in the failing light.

"How's everyone back home?" Andrew enquires.

"Fine, Nan is getting older, they all send their love," I reply wearily.

The waiting car is a Volkswagen Santana, manufactured by a joint venture company in Shanghai. My rucksack and bag are heaved into the boot; I slump on the back seat.

Through the darkened car windows, I get my first impressions of a Chinese city. Austere apartment blocks dominate the skyline; washing hangs from almost every window. Scores of shops are open, but none are of the type found in the West. Crowded along the pavement, some are no more than dimly lit openings. Interspersed amongst these are larger premises, restaurants and many temporary stalls and pavement cafes. The road is crowded with thousands of bicycles; our driver honks the horn and flashes the headlights continuously - it seems to be the accepted driving technique. Andrew talks endlessly, enquiring about home, pointing out and explaining some of what I'm seeing. I stare back with rolling eyes; his words bounce around my head half recognized.

Now out of Nanjing, we travel on a dual carriageway which, while bumpy, allows us to make good progress. What scenery there is merges with the darkness. Odd

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developments appear out of the gloom, but there are few lights to provide a clear view. The traffic is heavy - a multitude of buses, trucks and motorized carts make up for the lack of cars. Overtaking appears to be potluck; in fact, it's a nightmare. Our driver pulls out in full view of the on-coming traffic and the on-coming traffic merely repays the compliment. Everything then slows to almost a stop before passing - this isn't an experience I'm relishing. Andrew indicates that our car must belong to someone important as we have a red flashing light on the roof. Unfortunately, the light adds to the boldness of our driver while having little effect on the oncoming traffic, which is supposed to get out of our way. I pray for the journey to end so that I can at last relax.

Beijing Airport

In this place there is no riff raff
None of your average dross from society
Though granted from an unusual range of countries
To be here is reflective of relative success

Tourist yes, but a breed apart from the Sierra Grill³
To which lie closer compatriots from Hong Kong or Taiwan
With virgin rucksacks - mountain viewers strictly from above
Chic in their pumps and loud jackets slim in their beauty

Uniformed Russian officers, dutiful wives in tow
A couple in sad embrace
Semi-soused - a Socrates
All awaiting the dulcet tones, neatly spaced
So none remark the passage of an African Queen striding, hair piled high in black
furs and polka dot dress.

Some Means All

There are many people
Some would say too many
And here naturally "some" means all
Stubbornly they cling to the water-logged trunk
Nine tenths submerged and drifting

The trunk these people are immersed, sogged
And as they fidget
The trunk arbitrarily rotates to find new balance
Creating when settled, island chains causeways of cankered bark
While the heart-wood remains untainted.

³ Sierra Grill - Tourists that go to Spain.

Rose Glasses

Oh, for those simple days when the truth was known and new
Oh, for those simple days dressed in green or blue
Oh, for those simple days of purity, of heart
When right was right and wrong white dark

They were the truly simple days
The sun rose, the day passed the dog barked
Days of myth and legend
Days from which we've part.