

CHINA 1991

by *Faye Lynette Day*

China has the oldest continuous civilisation in the world, with a recorded history of 4,000 years. The famous Peking Man, *Homo erectus*, direct ancestor of modern man, whose relics were found in caves near Beijing, lived about 500,000 years ago.

En route to **Guangzhou**, with a 2,000-year history, I spent a night in **Hong Kong**, where tall buildings formed the backdrop to a market with purveyors of everything from flowers to fresh eggs, and to one of the world's busiest harbours, which always made interesting pictures.

—★— GUILIN —★—

Flying from Guangzhou, I began my escapade in **China** with one of the most beautiful trips in the country, or indeed the world: a cruise on the **Li River** in **Guilin**, also known as 'The best sight under heaven'. But first I experienced a scene that epitomised my concept of this land, gleaned from copious



LI RIVER

illustrations, that of jagged mountains beyond a little humpbacked wooden bridge crossing a peaceful lake, its banks lined with drooping willows, a rotunda with curled corners on the roof, and a few flowerbeds. A high lookout revealed the range of rugged peaks receding into the misty distance, the river and town in the foreground, and a typical pavilion on the edge of a cliff towering behind me. Poetic names given to these spires included Wave Curbing Hill, Solitary Beauty Peak, Piled Silk Hill, Folded Brocade, Five Tigers Catching a Goat, Yellow Cloth in Water, and Peak of Unique Beauty. The highest point, at 120 metres (400ft), was Piled Festoon Hill. My hotel in Guilin, on the façade of which neon lights resembling beaded and swagged curtains made a great display, also had the delightful flower name of Osmanthus, and another I stayed in was called Inner Magnolia. Guilin means Osmanthus Forest, and the fragrance of these trees pervades the warm air in summer. But the titles were not always complimentary: two sites near Wuxi were called Foolish Man Valley and Big Dustpan Hill!

A march of workers carrying red banners included two colourful Chinese dragons wreathed in smoke; I do not know if it was a protest or celebration. And so began my river journey. From its rocky bed, people were gathering pebbles or sand, which they placed in containers at the ends of a pole slung across the shoulder before walking gingerly across the stony river bottom and back to shore. Like fingers of rock, the unique karst mountains pointed skywards from gentle green slopes and sheer white walls. In places, the spires reared from a line of verdant trees and delicate fronds of feathery bamboo, the series of sculpted ranges appearing one behind the other, their mist-shrouded tops in the background blending into a dull sky. On waters that fluctuated from quiet stretches to low rapids, we passed people poling rafts and a couple of larger vessels ferrying passengers. The former included the famed cormorant fishermen, with their birds and baskets to hold the catch, on shallow craft constructed of bamboo poles lashed together. We passed isolated houses, a huge natural cave, towering cliff faces, myriad needles of rock reaching for the sky, and many fascinating creations of a wondrous nature featuring incredible shapes like those exhibited by icebergs. Soaring peaks in the distance were framed by valleys, and closer formations erupted from hills in many shades of green; it was very dramatic scenery. Low-lying cloud added to the ethereal effect of this strange, but extremely beautiful, magical terrain. In keeping with Chinese tradition, a rock in the river was titled Yearning for Husband. Resembling a European skyline punctured by the spires of many cathedrals, one could easily imagine the surroundings as God's own house of worship.

Approaching the village of **Yangshuo**, we came to stone houses with black tiled roofs, the houseboats of fishermen, cattle contentedly grazing, a two-tiered pagoda with red roofs, and many of the cormorants roosting on rafts. Yangshuo itself was an uninteresting much commercialised place, with fields behind the stone buildings, vegetables for sale beneath umbrellas, and another pagoda on a hill overlooking the river.

Back in Guilin, I witnessed a poor panda relentlessly pacing with its awkward pigeon-toed gait in a concrete compound with only a tiny patch of grass and a small pool, whilst the pretty surrounds of rocks, topiary trees and red flowers were reflected in a large pond. I visited the much photographed **Elephant Trunk Hill**, a rock formation resembling that particular appendage immersed in water and said to be the elephant on which the King of Heaven travelled the country. When it fell ill, a local farmer nursed it back to health, in return for which the elephant helped in the fields. The angry king turned the animal into stone and its trunk dipped into the river at Moon in the Water Arch, so called because the full moon reflected on the surface seemed to float within. Another view of the wonderful lake featured a marble and stone 'moon' bridge, so named because the reflection of the rounded overpass made it appear as a full moon. My second meal in China was quite an event. Expressing the desire to experience genuine local cuisine, my guide nominated a few dishes that I might care to try, including duck with water chestnuts that I selected. He wrote the appropriate words in Chinese on a scrap of paper and directed me to a shop with tables and tiny stools in the street. I was ushered in and a cloth ceremoniously produced as I handed over my written request. Whilst waiting, an elderly man in the traditional blue Mao suit, most commonly worn at that time, sat down beside me with a cage holding a live snake and proceeded to slit its belly to extract both blood and bile, which he drained into two small glasses containing rice wine. The poor creature was left to writhe whilst the man used chopsticks to beat the mixtures, which he then drank. In the meantime, my meal was served, and my stomach was heaving up and down like the snake as I attempted to consume the toughest meat of my life! Not to be outdone, I returned next evening and tried the bloody drink, but stopped short of the brilliant green bile. Another reptile having sacrificed its life, I completed the experiment with snake soup.

Whilst in Guilin, I also visited **Ludi Yan (Reed Flute Hill)**, its limestone caverns bearing romantic names such as Dragon King's Crystal Palace, but unfortunately I was not equipped to be able to film them. One of the stalagmites was known as The Old Scholar because whilst sitting and attempting to write about the grottos, a poet was unable to find words to adequately describe the splendour of the formations and pondered for so long that he eventually turned to stone. The Chinese have colourful names and stories for just about everything. The **Reed Flute Cave** was named for the reeds that once grew near the entrance and were cut and fashioned into flutes by local people. During WWII the local populace hid in the caves for protection from Japanese bombing raids.

—★— K U N M I N G —★—

In **Kunming**, 1,895m above sea level and also called City of Eternal Spring or Capital of Flowers, the main mode of transport, even for army personnel, was the ubiquitous bicycle. A street market set up under umbrellas outside ramshackle buildings furnished many subjects for my camera: fruits, a man weighing tomatoes on handheld scales, dried goods, cooked items in covered pottery containers, and a man standing to eat from a bowl with chopsticks. One lady carried a babe in a shawl on her back, and another had lemons in baskets at each end of a pole across her shoulders.

Entry to the **Longmen Grottos (Dragon Gate)** was marked by a decorated pavilion containing a shrine, and the venue consisted of a series of such structures and excavated caverns ascending the face of a high cliff, with panoramic views of **Lake Dianchi**, also known as Pearl of the Plateau, from the top. The path and caves took 72 years to hack out of the rock, and a second pavilion, engulfed in greenery, was circled by auspicious red pillars and inscribed with gilded Chinese characters. Various images and script adorned rock walls, and the whole was a source of extremely good pictures, the most impressive taken gazing up at the overhanging tree-lined precipice above and looking from the interior of a cave, the entrance of which framed a small pagoda on a higher level. With colourful elaborately carved eaves, floral decoration that included a large red lotus flower on a gable, and bamboo-tiled roofs, the structures held great appeal. Climbing the staircase, which overlooked the red rooftops, I found a stone lion at the foot of steps to the side and a beautiful circular window screen showing a white peacock on the branch of a tree.

Surrounded by trees, a three-tiered pagoda created superb reflections in a lily-covered pond, its lights twinkling in the water, and I was taken to lunch at a building with more stone lions at the base of stairs. Here, I was served my own banquet of numerous (about 20) unfamiliar dishes, the origins of which I had no idea. I considered that I would be safe with one crinkly white substance with the appearance of cabbage, but it turned out to be the webs of ducks feet! Disparaging themselves, the Chinese jest that they eat everything on four legs except the table and everything that flies except aeroplanes. Other dishes that I became aware of included: hot candied fish slices, soft-shelled turtles, fish balls wrapped in lotus leaf, braised snake with shredded chicken, fried shrimp balls and eight-jewel crisp duck, braised camel's paw, and roasted bones with sweet-scented osmanthus chicken wings and necks! Actually, the menu read 'sweat-scented' but I am sure that was a mistake! My meal was followed up by more film of decorative roofs on structures enmeshed in lush foliage.

My next tour was to a village of the **Sani** people and the Stone Forest. The former was a collection of primitive adobe dwellings with tiny windows and roofs of bamboo tiles or thatch in dirt streets at the entrance to the Stone Forest, which could not have provided more of a contrast with gorgeous mirror

images of its monoliths and overhead clouds in a perfectly still lake. Wandering the village streets, I noticed an abundance of corn drying in trees (and together with chillies on walls and roofs), stacks of wood and sticks, a woman winnowing grain, chickens, washing, stone fences, wooden carts, a pile of pumpkins, moss on a thatched roof, ladders against walls, one horse, and pigs, the latter including a big sow with a dragging belly and a litter of piglets – one peering in an open doorway. I came across illustrations on a door, a man herding goats along the street, a woman spreading grain with a long-handled wooden implement, a white dog hesitantly wagging its tail, a lady carrying buckets on a pole across one shoulder, and a red blanket hanging on a line, complemented by chillies on a wicker platter in the foreground. In spite of the obvious poverty and crumbling walls, the people were dressed in the colourful costume of this minority tribe.

Leaving the village via more wonderful reflections, I entered the **Stone Forest** and walked to a high vantage point where I could see over the formations, which loomed above dense trees that included many pines, before making my tortuous way along narrow chasms between towering pinnacles, strange eroded shapes, balancing rocks, and jagged peaks up to 30m (100ft) tall. One section of still green water vaguely reflected walls and fingers of rock erupting perpendicularly from the surface. Some were smooth, others weathered into furrows and fantastic formations in shades of grey with splashes of white and brown, but they were clustered so closely together that it was difficult to find an aspect incorporating the entire scene. Throughout the park, various formations had also been given poetic names such as Layered Waterfall and Phoenix Preening its Feathers. Legend stated that Ashima Rock was named for a young girl kidnapped by a wealthy aristocrat. Her lover tried to rescue her but she died and was turned into stone. China abounded with such tales. It was said that Chinese Immortals created the stone labyrinth to provide a place where courting couples could have privacy. Attempting to sell handcrafts, gaily dressed girls carrying multihued sunshades shadowed visitors heels.

On the road back to Kunming, my guide and I drove past more photogenic thatch-roofed stone houses ensconced behind stone fences, buffaloes, a man toting baskets on a pole, and a quaint white cottage with long garlands of corn suspended under its eaves, smoke curling from the chimney, and green hills behind. In a fascinating market full of colourful caged birds and parrots on perches, I saw an old man in the blue suit and cap smoking a traditional pipe. I toured a venue featuring a series of tiered pavilions with curved eaves and decorated roofs (one with the proverbial dragon), bright flowerbeds, and a lake with a rotunda and willows. An elaborate gateway led to a path lined with flowers and lacy green shade trees, and fir-fringed walkways were connected by small humpbacked bridges across water.

Outside old wooden buildings with latticed windows, a street market congested with bicycles had produce in baskets and lemons in crates on the roadway, cooked foods in basins beneath red umbrellas, steaming cauldrons, a man with a large basket containing some green vegetable on his back, a youth struggling through the crowd with yellow chrysanthemums for sale, and a cart carrying both sacks of goods and children. Pot plants enhanced a couple of shophouses, and an open gateway revealed a tiny yard containing a hen.

At **Emeishan**, I visited a small zoo where I got my second look at the magnificent black and white panda, one of which slid on its belly, its four legs extended, down a kiddie slide – a feat that I managed to capture on film. A second stood on hind legs to reach for saplings, from which it stripped leaves with its teeth. Another exhibit featured the appealing red panda; small, more like a racoon, with russet fur, a striped tail, and white-tipped ears and face, it was totally different from its namesake. I came to another market with

people humping large baskets on their backs and lemons everywhere. Men were playing dominoes or checkers, people stood to read the daily paper hung on walls, and a bus drove through with a great number of ducks – just sitting on the roof!

—★— C H E N G D U —★—

My next destination (where I stayed at the Swan Hotel) was **Chengdu**, City of Hibiscus or City of Brocade, also 2,000 years old, from where I travelled 165km (102mi) to see the mammoth **Dafu (Grand Buddha)** in the sleepy backwater town of **Leshan**. Carved from the face of **Mount Lingyun** at the confluence of the **Min, Qingyi** and **Dadu Rivers**, this 71m (233ft) image, begun in AD 713 and seated with hands on knees, was so immense that 100 people could congregate on its head, and one toe alone measured 24ft long. Originally covered with gold leaf and protected by a 13-storey pavilion that was destroyed in the Ming reign, it was now totally exposed but guarded against serious erosion by an ingenious internal drainage system.

Viewing it first from beside the gigantic head, which looked out over river and plain, I then descended to where people clambered all over its toes, each of which would also accommodate numerous people. On my film they project the illusion of a crowd of Lilliputians on a foot of the fabled Gulliver! More street scenes included ducks in panniers on a bicycle, other birds in cane baskets hanging from a pole across a shoulder – and more lemons! I visited one of the many elaborate temples, this one in a lovely setting of flowerbeds and dense trees with a verdant mountain backdrop. Framed by an arch, it produced perfect pictures. Unfortunately, with the old super 8 movie film I could not record the interior of any of the attractions.

Employing an old-fashioned wooden implement drawn by a buffalo, a man was ploughing next to newly planted paddies with a flock of white birds in the background. Another venue had restful water gardens with lotus and pavilions. Leaves from overhanging trees fell gently onto the green surface crossed by wooden walkways and a stone bridge. In Asia, similar traders always seemed to be assembled together, and bicycles, an oxcart, trishaw and bicycle cart, as well as pedestrians carrying loads, all stirred up dust in front of a row of open cooking stalls with carcasses hanging outside. I actually ate a meal here and seem to remember that it was quite good. On the road again, I saw enormous lengths of bamboo being transported on the inevitable bicycle, people stripping and selling bamboo, items displayed on the verge of the road, and live pigs, some wrapped in matting, strapped onto carriers.

—★— Y A N G T Z E R I V E R —★—

Chongqing was the headquarters of Chiang Kaishek and his forces during Japan's campaign to occupy all of China in the 1930's, and Zhou Enlai also lived here, but at the time of my visit it had little relevance for the tourist except as a ferry departure point.

From **Chongqing**, with its 2,000-year history, I travelled 1,300km to **Wuhan** on the famed **Changjiang (Yangtze River)**, at 6,300km the world's third largest. Many people have been relocated and much of what I saw now submerged in the making of a colossal dam. Barges were a common sight on the opaque brown water, and we stopped to visit a complex of exquisite pavilions and pagodas showcasing wonderful

traditional art. A large monastery with many curling eaves was apparent on a slope behind. On foot, we crossed a long suspension bridge that led to the ancient village destined to be lost to the world forever. In the centre, two people wheeled a trolley with huge baskets containing flowers of all colours, others toted poles from which large woven platters of vegetables were suspended, hens just sat on the pavement, and a man carried two by the legs. Plenty of tempting fresh greens were on display.

Back on board, we steamed past large ugly buildings like concrete blocks, barges, and a tall white pagoda that stood out on a hilltop. At times, the Yangtze was quite narrow and hemmed in by the high cliffs of three successive gorges (Qutang, Wuxia and Xiling), which allowed little light to penetrate. One section contained dwellings beneath a natural overhang in the looming mountains. As we proceeded, the enveloping high peaks and sharp ridges covered with low green scrub were almost lost in mist, layers of interesting shale-like rock formed part of the shoreline, and it took four men rowing with long-handled oars and poling to propel one small craft against the strong current. Scenically, the journey was awesome.

Gently rounded hills introduced our second stop, the ancient town of **Fenjie**, where I found old men with white beards wearing white turbans and carrying long sticks. All the towns along the river were situated at the top of steep stairways, I assumed because of the risk of flooding, and here a few people sold produce on the steps leading from the landing. I do not know if every day was market day, but one was certainly in full swing in this town. Many people were walking around with handcarts and the baskets on poles, and others sold a white commodity (perhaps rice) whilst seated on the paved street outside stone buildings.

After **Qutang Gorge**, near Fenjie, we took a detour up three of the **Danning River** gorges: **Loncmenxia**, **Bawuxia** and **Dicuxia** or, in English, **Dragon Gate**, **Misty Gorge** and **Emerald Gorge** respectively, passing beneath a high overhead bridge spanning the narrow entrance of the first. We had transferred to a smaller vessel, which at times had to be poled through fast moving rapids, the stout rod actually bending with the pressure exerted to propel our boat forward. Here, the water was a beautiful blue-green at the base of abruptly rising perpendicular white cliffs, their summits also greener in appearance. We veered around many rocky shoals and only passed a few other craft. People were washing their laundry on stony banks, an area of low hills encouraged the planting of crops, and the tops of mountains again disappeared into the haze. In one region, where I noted a lone tree with red foliage, people seemed to be panning on the rocky shoreline. Small boats drawn up on the beach in front of fields were used by farmers who had to travel in order to tend their crops, and white goats grazed on rocky slopes behind. People with loads of goods sat on rocks at the water's edge waiting for river transport, and we came to a still section with enchanting mirror images and white pebble banks. We sailed past a large natural cavern with Chinese characters on a boulder in front and a sprinkling of autumn hues above. In places, the white cliffs were tiered, like gigantic steps with green carpet on the treads. Again, lyrical names abounded: Tortoise Aiming High, Fairy Peach Peak, Ox Turning Around Cave Curtained by Waterfall, and Monkeys Reaching for Moon in the Water. It took three men to pole us the last turbulent stretch to the uninteresting town at the end, where people were washing at the foot of steps that accommodated many more vendors, and I seem to recall that we had lunch.

Returning to the murky brown Yangtze, we continued through Wuxia and Xiling gorges, passing an area of taller trees. It was interesting to learn that at one time only junks plied the Xiling, each having to be hauled through the rapids against the swiftly flowing current by 400 men on the riverbank. Pines formed the foreground to stark white cliff faces with jagged ridges, and we progressed past a couple of isolated houses, rock tors, rounded stone outcrops resembling turrets, and a red and white pagoda. In an interesting

encounter, we entered a loch with all manner of smaller vessels – two piled high with oranges. At a final stop, trees and a pagoda were beautifully reflected in a quiet patch of water, and another active market sold garlic, ginger, greens, potatoes, cauliflowers, tomatoes, celery and lettuce. Large burlap sacks contained a variety of goods, and a row of bright red chillies in neatly stacked pyramids made a colourful splash. Meat hung in the open alongside 100-year-old eggs and other most unappetising-looking speckled and coated specimens. I saw a lovely white pagoda with bells on delicately carved curled corners; these monuments sprouted everywhere, like cathedrals and castles in Europe or temples in the rest of Asia. Approaching Wuhan, the setting sun was a red orb in a polluted sky, and a fishing smack had a net on long bowed poles extending out one side, making it appear as if listing.

—★— W U H A N —★—

I disembarked at **Wuhan**, which was actually made up of three cities clustered on both sides of the Changjiang and its largest tributary, the **Hanshui**. The first was **Hankou** where we docked, the second **Hanyang**, where I visited the **Zhongyue Temple** with a pavilion above the red gateway, much like a miniature Tiananmen Square. On entering, I found a bridge lined with a lion and other stone figures, and doors containing beautiful panels with gilded relief of stork-like birds, willows, lotus, mountains, flowers, smaller birds, and branches. Metal urns stood in courtyards, and overlooking the river, its tongue protruding, was the head of a dragon that constituted the coping on a wall. A row of shops featured interesting rooflines, and I went to a demonstration of tea in a building with ornate wooden railing and trees in tubs. Another market, with fresh fruits including oranges, bananas and apples, piles of red and green chillies, ginger, Chinese cabbage, radishes, leeks, dried sardines, and numerous other dried and packaged products, most of which I did not recognise, made for colourful pictures. Purchases were weighed on handheld scales and meat, which included kidneys, chopped in the open. I came across fish traps in the river and, close to the waterfront, the Ming and Qing dynasty Guiyuan Monastery. This featured fretwork around moon gates, more metal urns, bamboo tiles, and sculpted eaves, their corners bearing dragons and hung with temple bells. Carved brackets bracing red pillars also depicted dragons, and door panels with gilded embossing portrayed classical figures, one holding a hair whisk. Bamboo featured amongst other greenery visible behind openings inset with beautiful leaves, fruits and flowers.

From here, I went to the **Yellow Crane Mansion** in **Wuchang**, the third city, with a crane sculpture in the forecourt. In reality, this was a five-storey pagoda (with upturned eaves) replacing the original Ming dynasty (1368–1644) structure that burnt down in 1884. Originally built as a watchtower in AD 223, in the time of the Three Kingdoms, it was repeatedly reconstructed throughout history after being destroyed by fires and war. The pagoda was situated between two smaller pavilions: Kanchuan (Overlooking the Land) and Lanhong (Taking Hold of the Rainbow), and the complex also contained a massive three-arched gateway flanked by white stone lions. This framed a white stupa in one direction, the pagoda in the other. Circular multihued flowerbeds, hedges, and topiary trees graced the courtyard. From upper balconies, the stunning panorama encompassed the gateway and pavilions, the river, bridge and city to one side, trees and gardens on the other. There is a fascinating story of how the pagoda received its name. Briefly: An innkeeper met a sick old man lying in the snow and carried him home on his back, where he treated him with food and drink. After six months the old man left, but before doing so drew a crane on the wall with a piece of orange peel. Fulfilling the old man's prophecy, following the clapping of hands the bird descended from the wall, and the news spread far and wide, attracting much business. After ten years the old man returned and played a jade flute, causing plum blossoms to bloom and the crane to dance. At the

end of the performance, the man mounted the crane and flew off into the sky, whereupon the innkeeper built the tower and decorated it with yellow cranes.

Attractive railing lined a walkway where rotundas, pleasure craft, a stone bridge, fish traps and boats were all mirrored in still water, a lack of air creating not even the slightest movement. Trees included autumn foliage, pines, and weeping willows, viewed through the fine trailing branches of which, pavilions made a lovely scene. The large white statue of a classical Chinese figure stood in front of a pagoda, and elsewhere glorious red flowers made a superb foreground, providing the only colour in pictures of pavilions enveloped in mist and surrounded by tall trees on the opposite shore of **East Lake**. Comprised of several lakes, this was six times the size of West Lake in Hangzhou. Amongst the poetic names associated with it were Flute Playing Hill, Wave Stones, Falling Wild Goose, Listening to the Wave Chamber, Moon Enjoyment Pavilion, Multifarious Scenery Platform, Water Cloud Pavilion, Poem Chanting Pavilion, White Horse, Lake Reflection Pavilion, Nine Girl Mound, and Painted Lakeside Corridor.

In 1911, the people of Wuhan staged an uprising that overthrew the last feudal dynasty in China.

—★— S H A N G H A I —★—

I moved on to **Shanghai** (the name means On the Sea) and **The Bund**, with its tall colonial buildings and a multihued display of flowers arrayed around a monument. As distinct from India, with respect to colour I found China monotonous, and rain added to the impression, spoiling my appreciation of a market, sheltered by awnings, where most were dressed in the traditional blue and even umbrellas were black, with the occasional addition of red or pink. However, in the city centre, the dull conditions could not detract from the outstanding **Yu Yuan Mandarin Garden**, entered via a zigzag bridge across water. Panels featuring black birds and trees, appearing like silhouettes, enhanced white walls enclosing a tiny courtyard containing rock gardens. Pavilions and delicate pale green willows were reflected in man-made lakes, and lovely scenes of lacy bare branches and Taihu Lake rock were framed by a moon gate. Taihu Lake rock was a significant feature of Chinese gardens, and its origin is explained later. Also featured were wooden balconies ornamented with fretwork, rotundas, more zigzag pathways, a few flowers including an exhibition of chrysanthemums, and covered walkways. Dragons were manifest on the corners of roofs and undulated atop a wall, with the inevitable lion amongst stone images beneath its bared fangs. Being winter, I obtained an entirely different perspective of gardens in China than on my subsequent visit (in summer) when they were alive with blossom. On this occasion, a man in a bright red shirt stood out in stark contrast to the monochrome surrounds.

Back in the streets, an impressive stone archway spanned a busy road and I came to the **Friendship Store and Exhibition Centre**, the star atop its towering spire reaching 106m into a murky sky. I do not recall the name of my next fascinating venue but it featured many images of Buddha in rock-hewn niches, one laughing representation, with a fat tummy, holding beads and flanked by smaller figures of acolytes. This particular image seems to be one favoured in the West but seldom seen in China. The garden also contained an old stone pagoda and an excellent relief of horsemen. It was in the grounds of a large red temple with flaming torches in the forecourt and round windows with beautiful metal-worked screens portraying dragons, birds and trees. Flowers and bamboo grew in front of screens depicting dragons and a white wall enhanced with graceful leaping gazelles executed in stone. A young girl played a traditional stringed

instrument, and rotundas were encapsulated in dense greenery. Red lanterns hung from the corners of a pavilion overlooking a lake, and behind a large slab of Taihu rock, a waterfall cascaded from the mouth of a fearsome-looking mythical beast almost hidden in lush growth.

Still outdoors, painted cranes and auspicious red furnishings formed the backdrop to a stage for Chinese opera. By the woebegone face of the performer, exhibiting an elaborate hairstyle and dressed entirely in white, it was obviously a tragedy. This is not my favourite form of entertainment, and for once I could be grateful for the lack of sound in old movies! An elderly man in the blue suit and cap sat entranced, a young child, her hair adorned with red pompoms, on his knee.

On a paved area of the city, in front of a statue in the centre of greenery and bright red salvia, a woman wielding a sword was gracefully executing slow-motion tai chi movements.

—★— H A N G Z H O U —★—

Moving on to 2,000-year-old **Hangzhou** (Gateway to Heaven), described by Marco Polo in the 13th century as One of the most beautiful and most splendid cities on earth, I stayed at the Wanghu Hotel, which boasted an incredible carved wooden panel depicting traditional Chinese life filling an entire wall of the foyer. They would not allow me to photograph it so I ‘acquired’ a compendium with the appropriate illustration from my room.

The Song dynasty established its capital in Hangzhou, and it was here that the most refined age of China was born. It lasted until the Mongol armies of Kublai Khan put it to the sword and destroyed it in a campaign to bring the whole country under their heel.

Today Hangzhou has nothing to recommend it apart from the huge serene **West Lake**, created in the eighth century, which alone made the visit worthwhile. Dragon boats waiting for custom lined the tree-shaded paved pathway around the shore, and I photographed a young lady in traditional costume with an ornate headdress. A sculpted horse reared atop an upright floral clock, and hordes of bicycles, including a trishaw laden with flowers, travelled the road circling the lake. The photogenic scenes included the usual pavilions, birds, willows, a stone bridge, and a background of hills.

Taking a boat ride, we pattered past an island with a small rotunda in the midst of trees, to another with a zigzag walkway leading across water to pavilions and rotundas surrounded by willows and other foliage, all beautifully reflected amongst lotus on the surface. Chinese people honour the lotus flower because it retains its purity even though it grows in mud. Behind one of the apertures in a white wall, a young lady with a cheery smile waved for the camera, and a stone lantern stood in the lake. Altogether there were three islets, one bearing the enchanting name of Three Pools Mirroring the Moon. Scenic spots had names like: Viewing Fish in Huangang Pond, Listening to Orioles Among the Willow, and Autumn Moon on the Calm Lake. Hangzhou was the beginning (or end) of the **Grand Canal**, which travelled 1,794km to Beijing in the north and was one of China’s ancient wonders. Begun 2,400 years ago, it was the earliest and longest man-made river in the world and linked five water systems, including the Yellow and Yangtze rivers.

—★— SUZHOU —★—

Suzhou, with a history of 2,500 years, was the Venice of the Orient, and tiny houses lined both sides of a maze of narrow but dirty canals where a lady stood on steps between buildings to scour her night pail. Little bridges crossed the waterways where street signs were attached to buildings, and stone steps led directly to the water from doorways of dwellings. Some greenery was evident in a few pot plants on ledges and trees that overhung walls. Behind the canals, bicycles were almost the sole source of transport in tree-lined streets full of shops with living quarters above and ancient tea houses with bamboo-tiled roofs. A bicycle inundated with woven mats was wheeled past, and another, with ducks hanging from the carrier and handlebars, was ridden by. Washing hung on buildings, and colourful birds sat in cages outside an open window above a canal; some were still there four years later and I think they were for sale from a shop, the front of which faced the street. If one could turn a blind eye to the filth and dilapidation, it was all very picturesque.

Suzhou was also renowned for its gardens, in four of which I spent considerable time and never tired. The first featured creeper-covered stone bridges, lotus, pavilions with a chain of red lanterns hanging from a corner, willows, intricately carved eaves with a floral design above small tableaux underneath, a moon gate in a white wall, which was the perfect foil for an autumn tree in front, and of course magnificent reflections; I even filmed a self portrait in a large mirror. More photographs of the calm canals with their stone bridges (one with a stone lion), white houses and weeping willows followed. In interesting side streets, I found an old man sitting on a stool in front of a round gateway near a small garden in the street, and I had a fascinating encounter with three ladies. Rarely was any English spoken, but I managed nine weeks in China with just 'Hello', 'Thank you' and 'Goodbye' in Mandarin, all of which I used on this occasion. The only other phrases I mastered in this extraordinarily difficult language, where the inflection makes a difference to the meaning, were the very important: 'How much is it?', 'That is too much', and 'Can you make it cheaper?!'

Pausing to film the round entrance near where the three women sat, one offered me a piece of bread from which she had been eating. Not wanting to appear rude (they were quite dirty) I accepted, putting my faith in inoculations, and found it freshly baked and surprisingly delicious. Indicating that I would like to purchase some, I was pointed in the direction of a stall with few items left but returned later when the baker had a new supply. Seated outside his home, which opened directly onto the street, a second man was smoking a cigarette. Washing hung overhead on a line strung from the front wall to the edge of a canopy above the door, and red flowers sprouted between the foundations and brick-paved road. Holding an infant, a smiling mother stood on a balcony (an attempt at beautification provided by bonsai plants in tins) overlooking a canal, a man staggered by under a heavy load that weighed down the pole across his shoulder, and others sat with items for sale on the pavement. Washing was strung on poles (bamboo had an infinite number of uses!), a washing machine sat *outside* a house, a man cycled by with a laden cart, and more washing stretched overhead across the narrow street.

With the aid of long-handled tongs, a man was baking bread in an outdoor clay oven, another was reading whilst seated on a chair in front of his door, where more red flowers emerged from the street, a woman washed vegetables at a well, and another scrubbed a large container. A barge made its way towards me as I stood on a bridge, and yet more red flowers (in pots) lined a parapet opposite white houses mirrored in the waterway. In a courtyard with washing hanging on the line, a duck nestled beneath a table holding utensils, a corner store sold fruits, and a lady pegged socks on cord strung under the roof of her tiny patio.

In confined space beyond an open doorway, a man was industriously chopping food on a wooden block beside a blackened cast-iron boiler, which sat on top of a clay oven surfaced with cracked white tiles, and on the steps of a canal, a woman washed a bucket with a straw brush.

Investigating the delights of a second garden, I strolled along vine-covered zigzag walkways connecting rotundas and pavilions with upturned corners on their bamboo-tiled roofs. This one exhibited a plethora of white stone, decorative balustrades, reflections and a stone lantern in the water, figures of fish and birds etched into a pebble pathway, willows, a glorious display of colourful flowers around a Taihu rock monolith, and a lovely scene captured through a rectangular window. From another bridge, I photographed more houses with steps leading to the water of a canal, and a complete circle formed by the perfect mirror image of a humpbacked stone bridge. A third garden featured beautifully reflected strings of blue and red lanterns, with willows and a tall pagoda in the distance. Red lanterns also added colour and dimension to the picture, framed by a moon gate, of a zigzag bridge, trees and pavilions. It was extremely peaceful, with few other patrons to disturb the tranquillity, no breeze to stir the leaves, ducks drifting on the water, covered walkways, a small courtyard with the artistic white stone, and a little humpbacked bridge. Walking past shops and a yard with the usual washing and utensils, I came to the fourth garden, but because my ticket stubs were all in Chinese I have no recollection of which was which. Delicate trees stood in front of a white wall with tracery insets, which were also given names such as Dragon Playing with Pearls and Phoenix Playing Among Peonies, and again there were beautiful reflections in this landscaped work of art. All the venues made extensive use of water.

More intriguing street scenes included the bakery shop where I had purchased my bread, a person chopping with a cleaver just inside a doorway, and a cat on a high windowsill, obviously disinterested in food on woven platters below! These were followed by pictures of a vendor wheeling a bicycle almost buried beneath the exceedingly colourful large round congratulatory tributes and a cart full of freshly slaughtered meat with a person weighing vegetables in the background. Boats loaded with vegetables were moored in a narrow waterway (their occupants emptying containers overboard!), and people cooked in a large steaming boiler on steps behind. On other boats, draped with the eternal washing and lined up beside a wall, people were eating their midday meal – although Chinese ate all the time! At a street market, fish lay in basins of water aerated by hoses, and chickens sat under a large net whilst others, trussed by the legs, were being weighed on the handheld scales.

My next stops were to photograph one of the elegant multi-tiered **Twin Pagodas** erected in the Song dynasty and two men poling a barge under a bridge. One of my most memorable and heart-warming encounters was with an elderly gentleman who sat eating his noonday meal in a minute front yard created by the Y-junction of two streets. With china bowls on a table to one side and his slippers on the sill behind, he contemplated the passing parade (including me) as he consumed his food. I must confess that I attempted to obtain a candid shot without his notice, but when he became aware of me, I requested his permission, which to my surprise was freely given. This delightful old man insisted on posing (with a beaming toothless smile above a greasy chin!), and when I passed by later in the day he greeted me with a cheery wave; although seemingly engrossed in his newspaper, he never missed a thing!

I thoroughly enjoyed ambling along the narrow twisting streets of this charming town, past a vine-draped moon bridge, sacks of grains or lentils, and the preparation of fascinating foods, which people ate in the street. Two types of dim sum snacks were produced: one by selecting small portions of meat with chopsticks and wrapping it in rounds of flattened dough, the second by spooning batter over grated potato

in a ladle, which was then plunged into boiling oil in a wok on a metal drum containing a coal fire fanned by hand. An old man in the blue suit and cap, a burning taper in hand, sat smoking a long-handled pipe, and a meat cart, partially covered with cloth, stood in an open market where vegetables were also sold and a lady sat using chopsticks to stuff balls with a filling. Another weighed fish taken from a wooden container filled with water, and two people made sweet concoctions from rolled pastry cut into strips, twisted, and deep fried in lard using a large slotted spoon. Willows, people poling and carrying loads, a small garden outside white walls, a more affluent home with a moon gate, reflections of yet another bridge, and the inevitable washing completed my sightseeing.

—★— W U X I —★—

Travelling by boat on the main canal (a journey described in detail in a later chapter), I left Suzhou for **Wuxi**, with a long history going back 6,000 years. The present city was built in the second century BC when tin was discovered in a nearby hill. It was named Yauxi meaning Has Tin, but was later changed to Wuxi (No Tin) when the metal was mined out. Nowadays, because of rich natural produce, it is called by the equally unromantic name of A Land of Rice and Fish. I stayed at the Hubin Hotel, with a magnificent panorama from my window of the **Spring Lingerin Pagoda** in the water, willows, and a lovely curved bridge in **Liyuan Garden at Lake Lihu**, made up of five smaller lakes. The covered Thousand Step Corridor, its wall decorated with around 100 flower-shaped windows, led to the **Four Season Pavilions**. Symbolising spring, summer, autumn and winter, they were named Flowing Red Pavilion, Green Dripping Pavilion, Drunken Yellow Pavilion and Chanting White Pavilion respectively, and were represented by spring plum, oleander, osmanthus and wintersweet. Going down for closer inspection, I found a sublime garden in an idyllic setting, with perfectly mirrored images in still water, ornamental bridges, graceful trees, and decorative rooflines, all of which comprised some of the most beautiful film that I had ever taken, particularly in the glow of sunset. A tank contained white ‘goldfish’ with red topknots, which glistened in the sunlight, and flowerbeds in the hotel grounds featured flawless blooms of enormous dahlias in pink, white and yellow. Beds of this same flower, in mixed colours, were also an attraction in yet another garden, along with trailing blossoms reflected in water, large white birds gliding over a lake, pavilions, and a variety of massed blooms in front of a triple-arched gateway.

Seated on the ground, I encountered a group of young girls dressed in colourful garb with elaborate hair adornment. Because of the edict that allows only one child, each was gaily attired (in contrast to the adult population), indulged, pampered, and inclined to be precocious. Thousands of bicycles negotiated streets where I found freshly baked buns and, along canals, small houses with wooden upper stories and tiny attics. I also came across an ornate multi-tiered pagoda, men playing cards on the sidewalk, and fishing junks on a sparkling sea. Wuxi, also called Radiant Pearl in the Lake, was a major centre for the production of silk, and it was from nearby **Taihu Lake** that the ornamental stone was procured; the fourth largest lake in China, it was no more than ten feet deep at any part.

—★— N A N J I N G —★—

The history of **Nanjing (Nanking)** can be traced back to 4000 BC, featuring most significantly in the first Opium War, the Taiping Rebellion, as a brief capital (in 1911) under Sun Yat Sen’s provisional government, as the 1937 headquarters of Chiang Kaishek’s government, and in 1949 when the communist

forces of Mao Zedong took the city. But I came for one reason: to visit the **Memorial of Sun Yat Sen**. Surrounded by thick forest, it was entered via a triple-arched gateway leading to a mammoth staircase. Wide and 323m long, it ascended a series of hills with a pavilion at the top of each level, the main monument concealed until the last rise. It was a lengthy and arduous climb (392 steps), but the views made the effort worthwhile. The Revolution of 1911, led by Dr Sun Yat Sen, overthrew the Qing dynasty and founded the Republic of China.

Nanjing also had an avenue of fanciful life-sized stone images facing each other in pairs on a tree-lined median strip: the **Sacred Avenue of the Filial Tomb** of the Ming dynasty, or **Avenue of the Spirits**, leading to the tomb of the first Ming Emperor, Hong Wu. Beginning with ancient warriors, it progressed through squat-looking horses, elephants – both standing and kneeling, as were stubby-legged camels – and the ubiquitous lion, finishing with warriors again. The 35-mile Ming city wall, two-thirds of which still stands, was the longest the world had ever seen. Nanjing lies between the Crouching Tiger (mountains) and Curling Dragon (Yangtze River).

—★— L U O Y A N G —★—

I continued on to **Luoyang** and one of four sets of amazing grottoes that I was to see on my trip. These awesome venues contained literally thousands of Buddha images carved into rock-hewn niches and recesses. Ranging in size from a mere few centimetres to many metres in height, the largest, a seated **Vairocana** (meaning illuminating all things in sutra) **Buddha in Fengxian Cave**, was 17.14m (59ft) high, the head 4m and the ears 1.9m. He was flanked by disciples Kasyapa and Ananda. Holding a pagoda in the palm of his right hand and crushing a demon underfoot, an image with a serene face stood next to one carrying a weapon and wearing an angry countenance. These **Longmen Buddhist Grottos** were carved around the year 488 and added to in the Tang dynasty, leaving a magnificent heritage that had taken 400 years to accomplish. More than 2,100 grottos containing 100,000 images covered a cliff face overlooking the **Yi River**. The figures were either seated or standing and some had a hand upraised as if in benediction. A couple wore elaborate headdresses, and most had elongated earlobes. Several, having suffered the ravages of time, were without arms or heads. Unfortunately, some had also been lost to overseas museums. Sculpted relief lay above excavated archways and around a few of the heads. The gigantic façade dwarfed tall trees on top.

The principal image in the **Cave of Ten Thousand Buddhas**, a 4m-high **Amitabha** (Buddha of Infinite Light), was seated on a lotus flower throne (sumeru) shouldered by four muscular warriors carved into the sides. On the walls, 15,000 tiny (4cm) Buddhas appeared to be representations of the main figure, and sitting on lotus leaves above lay 54 bodhisattvas (enlightened beings) in long flowing skirts, their poses as vivid as life, their visages displaying a variety of moods: grave, reserved, naïve, and joyful. According to the period created, the Buddhas reflected severe, benign, or kindly countenances. Perhaps the most extraordinary was the sixth-century **Medical Prescription Cave**, with 140-odd ancient remedies inscribed on its stone walls, including both herbal – pills, powders, potions and ointments – and acupuncture treatments for a wide variety of ailments and injuries. Sculptures in the oldest cave, **Guyang**, tell of how Prince Siddhartha, founder of Buddhism, attained enlightenment. They show the entry of the white elephant into the womb of the prince's mother, her excursion into a park and the birth of the prince under a tree, his baptism by nine dragons, and other events that form a complete story in stone.

Passing donkeys pulling carts with the appearance of enormous cane baskets, I was taken to an extremely interesting underground village. Consisting of rooms leading off an excavated square pit with trees in the centre, the individual dwellings were entered through doorways in the tile-capped sides of the cavity, which was accessed, like the tombs of Egypt, via steps down a sloping ramp between high walls. From above, I could see a cat on a cane chair, chickens (some on a doorstep) with a basin of feed, a straw broom, a wooden bed, and a bucket and bowls in the communal yard. Nowadays, people lived mostly above ground, and in a bucolic setting I found many chickens and pigs, one absolutely immense like a small pony, wandering amongst the dwellings, and old ladies in blue, who seemed very surprised to see a stranger. One was tending a black cast-iron pot on her outdoor clay oven, another sorting grain on a mat. Here also, I saw bicycles and a cart, a cane basket, washing on lines, a wagon pulled by a cow, piles of kindling and wood, corncobs hanging to dry – one string with a hen on top, pecking at kernels and flapping its wings to maintain balance – and the sun setting behind a curled roof.

—★— Z H E N G Z H O U —★—

From **Zhengzhou**, en route to Xi'an, I took a tour 80km to see the **Shaolin Monastery** (AD 495), considered to be the birthplace of Zen Buddhism and the martial art of kung fu. The four main red buildings were no different from dozens of others, with carved eaves, guardian lions, and metal urns in the courtyard, but were surrounded by a fantastic forest of 220 tiered yellow brick pagodas: a cemetery dating back 300 to 1,000 years, where remains of eminent monks in the history of the temple were interred. A few were bulbous with ringed spires (like stupas), one was adorned with fine embossing, and a couple slightly overgrown, but all blended well with yellow autumn trees against a background of dry hills. A forecourt containing stelae was sheltered by an enormous shade tree with delicate pale green leaves, a sculpted stone gateway led to another courtyard, and an entrance featured a wonderful polychrome guardian with a benign face. Scenes in the rural village included the usual chickens and washing.



TEMPLE GUARDIAN

I was particularly fortunate in as much as a festival was in progress at one of the temples, where stone lions guarded the tripartite entrance with an elaborate pavilion on top, again like that in Beijing. A large congested crowd carried flags, and offerings were for sale by vendors seated on the ground. Also sitting cross-legged on the pavement, devotees sold sheets from stacks of paper bearing Chinese characters and weighted down with stones or bamboo. A metal image that had the appearance of a martial arts exponent was the focus of attention, with people touching it for luck and rubbing its tummy – one lady holding up a baby to kiss the protuberance! Huge fierce temple guardians flanked the doorway, people carried balloons, and one bearded man sold some item in metal bowls to a man carrying a sheepskin bundle. Quite a few representatives of the Chinese army were in evidence. Fine artwork decorated the gateway and temples, life-sized statues were lined up inside, and beyond one doorway I observed red lanterns and a huge gaudy figure with eyes on the wrist. One man in a black robe had long hair wound into a topknot, and people selling fruits sat back to back in a row, whilst others, their clothing nearby and obviously pilgrims, squatted with chopsticks to eat noodles from portable containers, one man drinking from a bucket. Along the road, I saw a donkey pulling a cart concealed by a load of hay as big as a house.

The Chinese also conduct festivals at the drop of a hat, and two such celebrations included the traditions of ‘enjoying looking at the moon’ during the Mid Autumn Festival, and ‘enjoying looking at chrysanthemums’ on the Double Ninth Festival – ninth day of the ninth lunar month. Operatic arias included Weep Over the Ancestral Temple and Kill the Son at the Outer Gate of the Government Office! Even the beautiful azalea is given inappropriate names: Green Dressing and Crown, Broken Pieces, Horse Ribbon, Monkey Head and Deer Horn!

—★— X I A N —★—

Xi’an, the 3,000-year-old **Chang’an** (Everlasting Peace), capital of ancient **Cathay** in the Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220), once the largest city in the world and now capital of **Shaanxi** province, was a depressing city and the most polluted that I had ever experienced; in fact, for the first time I was forced to spend a day in bed because of it, but once it was the start of the fabled silk road that drew merchants trading in porcelains, precious stones, silks and spices. The capital of China for 11 dynasties, at that time it was an imposing city rivalling Baghdad, Constantinople and Rome. It was renamed Xi’an (Peace in the West) in 1369.

The first things that I saw were pavilions atop the 12m/40ft-high **Old City Wall** – best preserved in China, constructed in the Ming dynasty to defend the city against marauding barbarians – the tall Tang dynasty (618–907) **Pagoda of Xiaoyan (Small Wild Goose)**, a bridge spanning a fairly dry river outside the crenellated grey walls, and a colourful archway across a street of dull grey buildings with the occasional decorative doorway. The brown 45m-high 15-storey pagoda was built in the **Bliss Proffering Monastery** in AD 707, and one could not miss the mighty **Drum** (1308) and **Bell** (1384) towers, which as the names suggest, once contained a huge drum and cast-iron bell respectively, both used to toll the hour. A variety of cooked foods were on offer in proximity to large round loaves of flat unleavened bread stacked near a metal drum belching black smoke.

A visit to the **Qin Shi Huang Mausoleum**, with its over 8,000-strong terracotta army, horses, chariots and weapons, was also a disappointment because the serried ranks appeared just like all the pictures that I had seen, filming was strictly forbidden, and they stood to attention in a covered enclosure viewed from an elevated catwalk along which one was continually urged to keep moving. I believe that restrictions on photography have now been relaxed, but at the time I could only film one warrior – behind glass. The most interesting fact was that each bore the distinctive features of the man on whom it was modelled. 700,000 workers took 36 years to build the tomb, the main chamber of which, with its repository of riches, was yet to be uncovered. Qin Shi Huang was a ruthless dictator, the unifier of China, who standardised the written language, linked the Great Wall, and founded the Qin dynasty (221–206 BC). Opposed to education, culture and commerce as non-productive, the Qin society was a harsh warring regime with sophisticated weapons, which ruled through fear. It used such methods of punishment as flogging, cutting in two at the waist, and boiling in a cauldron. The Great Wall was achieved using forced labour. In earlier dynasties, servants, slaves and attendants had been entombed with their master, a tradition later replaced with wood or straw effigies. Qin’s was the first tomb where life-sized realistic figures appeared. Carrying bronze swords, spears and crossbows, which did not feature in Western European warfare until the 14th-century, the army of fierce, grave, earnest, smiling and kindly countenances stood row upon row, followed by horses hitched to wooden chariots, which together with their leather harness no longer existed.

Even the lake was a dirty grey, but still reflected pavilions, rotundas, willows, a white dragon, a stone walkway, and green slopes beyond. Viewed one behind the other, a couple of round grey gates surmounted by dragons made an attractive picture, as did two smiling children, the boy in army uniform, on the steps of a pavilion. I also visited the Tang dynasty **Dayan** or **Big Wild Goose Pagoda** (AD 652) in the **Monastery of Great Benevolence**, and in the vicinity of a large mosque with cupolas and decorated arches, was surprised to see a man turning kebabs over a coal brazier next to hanging carcasses. Donkey carts were driven down the main streets, as was a herd of cattle, sheep and goats! Round flat bread was stamped with a pattern of circles and glaze applied with a brush before being placed, by means of a long skewer, into a deep open-topped adobe oven.

The weather had turned very cold, and snow lay on the ground when I visited an interesting pastoral area with a small mosque, flat-roofed stone houses, cattle, a rustic ladder leaning against stables and/or storage huts with straw on top, log fences, outdoor clay ovens, horses (two with feedbags), chickens, and more dogs than I had seen to date, all with a mountain backdrop. Taking a short walk, I found that the white precipitation had beautified a sombre grey landscape. It blanketed the fir forest and a frozen stream, coated rocks, and enveloped a scintillating frozen cascade; a rabbit even scampered across my line of sight. I photographed a family group, two of whom wore red cardigans that brightened the picture. A cow was tethered to an enclosure fenced with bamboo, a tractor-drawn cart sat in a yard, and a woman was gathering something in a pail. Accompanied by his dog, a man was riding one sturdy mountain pony whilst leading another, and a man on a horse led a shaggy long-haired camel, the like of which I had not seen before but was common in this part of the world. Known as the Bactrian, they were the lifeblood of the ancient Silk Route because they could go months without water and carry 270kg loads for nearly 200km at a stretch. They tolerated temperatures from freezing cold to blistering heat, and their long eyelashes and sealable nostrils helped protect them from blowing sands. Stopping for pictures of another community, I observed a small mosque, flat roofed dwellings with straw on top, cows, barking dogs, tiny birds in a tree, and a mudbrick wall with gateways leading to individual yards. I was invited in by a smiling mother holding an apprehensive serious-faced infant with very ruddy cheeks, warmly dressed in an orange woollen hat, thick black-mottled yellow coat, and blue pants. In another area, bread was being baked in front of a small mosque, and men in black congregated in a wide street where stallholders were preparing food surrounded by flocks of sheep and both donkey and bicycle carts. In the evening, I attended a Tang dynasty Dinner Show at the Lido.

—★— K A S H I —★—

I flew to Urümqi, and from there over snowy mountains to **Kashi** in the extreme west of this vast country, known as **Kashgar** on the other side of the border, where my principal purpose was to experience the Sunday market. By now the reader will be aware of my penchant for markets, but this had to be the most amazing spectacle that I have ever witnessed. I spent considerable time on the verge of a long straight road lined with bare poplars, filming the influx of thousands of people arriving in a constant stream by foot, on bicycle and horseback, riding donkeys, in donkey carts and drays, and by the occasional car or truck. In fact, every conceivable conveyance was piled with goods to trade, which included sacks of produce, huge ornate red boxes, and a load of square baskets, stacked higher than the man standing on the front of a wagon to urge his small donkey forward! A tethered cow plodded behind a cart. Mostly rural people – desert nomads and tribal Uyghurs, Tajiks, Kerghez and Uzbeks – the long-bearded men were dressed in fur or woollen caps and long coats, and the women wore woollen hats or headscarves, but the

Muslim women were completely covered by veils. Amongst the walkers were two leading, respectively, a cow and four sheep (three black and one white) by ropes. People were perched on top of goods, a man cycled whilst holding hens by the legs in one hand, another rode past on a frisky horse, tossing its head as it trotted in front of two horse-drawn carriages and a tractor-drawn cart, and a donkey trailed behind yet another cart. I filmed amusing vision of a small donkey ferrying a large bearded man whose feet nearly touched the ground. There were loads consisting of long poles, piles of melons or gilt boxes, and carts laden simply with people.

Adjourning to the huge market arena, I found people bartering for sheep, wagons lined up with donkeys still in the traces, baskets of greens and fruits, loads of hay and melons, men in turbans gathered around woolly sheep, trays of eggs on a handcart, a man leading a big black bull, doughnuts on a stall, carpets in a donkeydrawn cart, and a young boy cradling a puppy but wary about the camera. All was perpetual motion in front of flat-roofed buildings with colourful traditional patterns on doorways. My film of the constant hustle and bustle continued with a man weighing meat cut from suspended carcasses, two old men with grey beards sitting quietly talking in the midst of the organised (I assumed) chaos, heaps of what looked like sugarcane and a type of grass, a parade of carts piled high with cabbages, and a woman, her head swathed in a woollen scarf and wearing long gumboots, carrying poultry. An elderly bearded man sat cross-legged on a wagon, and a cart hauled lengths of trimmed branches that trailed on the ground behind. I saw a small herd of longhaired white goats and a man stuffing pastry to create fancy-shaped snacks, which were cooked in a huge clay oven. Nearby, people were drinking from bowls and more butchers were in evidence.

I took a brief respite from the overwhelming turmoil to see a tiny pavilion decorated with a small amount of patterned brickwork and reflected, along with drab adobe houses, in a patch of water, the only colour provided by laundry. The **Abakh Hoja Tomb**, with its green tiled dome and minarets (tiled in many colours) like towers at the four corners was, by contrast, outstanding. Surrounded by cone shaped graves, the main tomb contained 72 burial places, most decorated with mosaic tiles, and it was said that wealthy Muslims wanted to lie beside the central sarcophagus, which according to legend held the costumes of Xiangfai (Fragrant Concubine), a renowned beauty from the region kidnapped by a Qing dynasty ruler and taken to the Forbidden City in Beijing.

Back into the fray, I saw women in shawls, the inevitable buckets carried on the ends of poles, more butchers, hessian sacks filled to the brim with nuts, dried goods, spices and herbs, and even grapes in tubs and baskets. Raisins were a big industry in Turpan (see below). Along one wall, a row of barbers was fully employed shaving heads and faces, and I arrived at the cattle market, where I noticed an unusual black and white spotted cow. Here, food was being cooked in large enamel and cast-iron basins on top of clay ovens with roaring open flames. Amongst this hotch-potch of scruffy humanity, I came across cattle, braying donkeys, sheep, the haughty two-humped furry camels, and horses in colourful beautifully crafted saddles and blankets, which were being put through their paces by riders urging them up and down to show them off.

One of the most intriguing things that I observed was the making of fresh noodles, which entailed quite a bit of showmanship. Rolled strips of dough were stretched by swinging like a skipping rope until long enough to loop and twist automatically together, a process repeated until a desired thickness was achieved. The resultant mass was then banged on a floured table and magically separated into copious strands! The end of the whole was then stuck to edge of the table, stretched again, and the threads broken off for

immersion into boiling water. A man sat eating the finished product (or porridge) from a bowl with his fingers. In another area, where food was being prepared and cooked in steaming cauldrons or kebabs fanned over naked coals, people were eating at long tables covered with red plastic.

I found prospective buyers gathered around a fleece on the ground and two men with long white beards sitting with jars of potions under an international Red Cross sign; an adjacent stallholder was selling powders or some such from small hessian bags. Bright carpets with traditional patterns hung on a line, money changed hands, and used clothing was for sale. According to my guide book, even in the 19th century it was a great bazaar in which Indian, Afghan and Russian traders jostled and rubbed shoulders with Muslim and Mongolian tribesmen, Chinese settlers and exiles, bandits, tomb and temple robbers, and some of the scurviest most dangerous human flotsam of Central Asia, even Russian spies. And nothing much seemed to have changed! It was said to be further from the sea than any other town on earth and was a vital watering hole, trading post, and supply depot for Silk Route camel caravans – and a prime target for nomad attack.

Outside the market, a cow running down the main street was leading its owner a merry dance, and narrow back alleys had covered overpasses. A man was weighing grapes taken from a cane basket on his cart, and another, hammering a horseshoe, sat on a small stool near a small fire in front of a shop with musical instruments on a sign above the door and a caged bird hanging from a bare tree. An elderly man sat on the pavement with his kettle, a few bright red tomatoes on a mat, and some white product in baskets.

But there were other sights in this dusty isolated desert town, namely, the large yellow brick **Id Kah Mosque**, with colourful tiles on the arched entry, elegantly carved and coloured wooden pillars, and stone tracery in the windows of its minarets, two three-storey structures with sculpted arched balconies, and a large building with a dome and two cupolas on top. The entire time I spent in Kashi provided subjects and opportunities for superb footage – and I did not see one other European!

—★— URÜMQI AND TURPAN —★—

I flew back to **Urümqi** where, sadly, because of the wintry conditions, I could not get to see its most splendid attraction: **Sky** or **Heavenly Lake**. I was amazed that in a region accustomed to snow and ice, vehicles were not equipped with chains to handle it and slipped and slid every which way; it was the same in Hohhot, where even walking was treacherous. From here, I set out to travel overland, passing cattle being herded across the treeless expanse of flat desert plain with snowy mountains in the far distance, and then traversing a waterless sea of dunes leading to **Turpan**. Once an important stop on the southern and central Silk Roads, this was situated right in the middle of the **Turpan Depression**, where the desert floor sank 154.43m (492 ft) below sea level to form a piteously hot furnace. Turpan means Lowland, and it was the second lowest spot on earth after the Dead Sea. The daytime temperature on the slopes of **Huoyan Shan (Flaming Mountains)** often reached 70°C, and the rock and red soil flared into shimmering ‘fire’ when struck by the sun, hence the name. With multi-creviced sides, their topography also took on the appearance of myriad flames. However, my accommodation in the Turpan Hotel, with decorated balconies and cupolas on the roof, was delightful.

From here, I visited the two ruined cities of Jiaohe and Gaochang. The former, founded in the second century and a Tang dynasty garrison in the wars against the Turkic tribes, was razed by Genghis Khan in

the 14th century, and the latter, established by the Uygurs when they migrated from Mongolia in the ninth century, was mysteriously abandoned in the 14th century. Although derelict, their ancient mud-brick and rammed-earth buildings appearing more like weathered stone monoliths or monuments, the aura was incredible, because apart from my guide I was the only person at both venues. In the utter stillness, one could almost hear the cries and commotion of people and carts in the deserted once paved streets of these prior important hubs, where relatively sophisticated communities even had underground chambers dug below each dwelling to give shelter from the fierce daytime heat. With the permission of my guide, I collected a couple of shards of ancient pottery, which was a thrill. **Jiaohe** stood at the edge of a sheer deep ravine, with fields, a few bare poplars, horses and water far below. Windows like empty eye sockets stared sightlessly from lone walls, and I took photographs of more-recognisable structures framed by gaping holes, whilst other remains appeared as rock tors against the light. One building still retained some decorative brickwork, but much was hidden by time and sand.

Leaving here, we paused at a house where a man was sorting sultanas on a mat beneath bare vines covering a pergola, and I was shown wells and the ingenious Karez system of irrigation that travelled a considerable distance relying on gravity for the flow of underground water. Famous for this particular fruit, Turpan was also called the City of Grapes and consequently known as the hottest, lowest, driest and sweetest place in China! It earned the name Fiery Land in the Yuan Period because of the heat, the highest recorded temperature being 49.6°C.

Back in town, I filmed the exquisite exterior of the new mosque, with six fine minarets and intricate decoration above the entrance, which was startling white against its grey façade. This was very different from the nearby older and plainer green-domed place of worship with crescents on top of its two minarets. Following a dun-coloured canyon with smooth windblown sides, craggy ridges, and a winding waterway divided into several streams criss-crossing an almost dry bed we came to the ancient burial complex of the **Atsana Tombs**, their walled entries, again like Egypt, sloping into the earth, and many as yet unopened. I was taken to see a body amazingly well preserved in the dry atmosphere of this arid, stark, but surprisingly arresting countryside. We drove through a village beside an irrigation canal, where mud bricks were used to create an open pattern on fences, and goats ‘climbed’ trees to reach sparse dry leaves. **Gaochang**, with some homes resembling cave dwellings, seemed to have withstood the rigors of time even less, and it was remarkable how both cities had utterly cohered to become part of the landscape from which they were originally forged.

On the return journey, I saw an attractive mosque constructed with dun-coloured bricks, and donkey carts trotting down the highway between adobe walls the same colour as the earth. Large logs were stacked on a verge, and small bridges crossing a culvert provided access to a village where I found another small mosque, carts with green vegetables, bicycles, pumpkins and root vegetables placed on jute bags on the ground, donkeys, a lone sheep, a tethered goat, and a population mainly of men – all of whom stopped to stare. As a foreigner in China, at times I found it very disconcerting when people, quite unabashed, openly pointed at things like my nail polish, and laughed outright at my feet clad only in sandals, which was not the done thing, I gathered, in the filthy streets where spitting was a constant expectation and animals fouled the pavements. Whenever I heard the sound of someone (men and women) clearing their throat, I was apprehensive as to where the resultant mass would lodge! At no time did I feel threatened, but it could be embarrassing.

We made our way back past the monotonous incised slopes of the ‘flaming’ mountains, and once again in town, I saw vendors with meat hanging in a stall near a mosque, donkey carts being driven along dusty thoroughfares, people unloading hay from a wagon, a man walking a cow down a narrow alley bounded by adobe walls, a cow in a byre made from the clay bricks, a lady washing clothes in an irrigation canal and, in front of the very colourful façade of yet another small mosque, a man driving a dray carrying long trimmed branches. A donkey cart carrying cabbages was followed down the main road by sheep and running children (one small boy having great sport chasing the sheep!), and ducks waddled off to the side. I spent a most enjoyable time ambling along dirt streets where empty wagons lay outside doorways, and donkey carts stood patiently beside dilapidated adobe walls (a few with open brickwork decoration) or were driven through the narrow lanes. One carried greens covered by a carpet, the donkey with red adornment on its nose. I also saw a mosque enhanced with a colourful diamond design and script, a dray carrying a family, and a baker using tongs and a long-handled wire basket to remove fat crusty loaves from the inside walls of a clay oven onto which they had been stuck to cook. I came to a market devoted solely to the sale of green and brown raisins, which were displayed in heaps on matting on the ground, weighed by handheld scales, and tipped loose into customer’s bags. One man was wearing an interesting embroidered cap.

Crossing a vast salt pan, I visited a mosque that, except for an open brickwork balustrade on the flat roof, had a plain façade but featured a conical mud minaret beautifully decorated with engraved flowers, lattice and zigzag patterns. A bucket with a long rope attached stood at the edge of a brick-lined well in the compound. Set amid arid terrain, it was the subject of excellent pictures. Amongst interesting alleys, I found a food market where, next to piles of bamboo and heaps of apples, a man was cooking large lumps of lard and a goat’s head, its teeth bared in the rictus of death, in a boiler over flames! Minarets of a mosque reared above mud-brick walls with vegetation placed on top to dry, pure white ducks waddled down the street and across a canal, a cow stood tethered to one of the old walls, a herd of goats came towards me in the roadway, a wooden bed stood in a yard, and I filmed the sunset behind the dome and crescent topped minarets of another mosque.

Train travel in China was interesting to say the least. On one occasion, fellow passengers in my carriage requested (with sign language) to look at my ticket, which they passed amongst themselves with great hilarity, for the obvious reason that I had paid at least twice the going rate, always the case for foreigners. I also found it extremely difficult, after sharing a sleeping compartment with all men, when I was scheduled to alight in the early hours one morning; nobody was awake, none spoke English anyway, and all the signs were in Chinese characters. I had to rely on the conductor being conscientious enough to notify me when we reached my destination, which brings me to two more interesting, but again heart-warming episodes, this time illustrating the language problem. The first was on this same trip when the lady conductor patiently attempted to convey something to me and finally, in desperation and frustration, resorted to writing it on paper – in Chinese! Retaining the slip, I later enquired what it read and was informed that she had been asking me if I required anything to eat; hot water was always provided in a thermos for people to brew their own tea from leaves carried in screw top jars.

The second incident occurred when I caught a train on the final leg of my exciting journey tracing the ancient silk route to the far west of China on the border with Afghanistan. Heading for **Dunhuang** (City of Sands, founded 11 BC), in **Gansu Province** and traversed by the **Silk Road**, I was put off at a station that appeared to be in the middle of nowhere. Aimlessly wandering the platform, I just kept repeating the name of my destination to anyone who would listen, but to no avail. Finally, a female guard came along

and, without a word, took me by the arm, led me towards another disembarking passenger, and put me in her care; neither spoke a word of English. Much to my consternation, this young lady hustled me to a bus station. Anticipating a train connection, I kept saying ‘Dunhuang’, but she insisted that I purchase a bus ticket and wrote the amount on the palm of my hand. I ultimately understood that we had arrived at **Liuyuan**, a siding three and half hours from Dunhuang across the **Gobi Desert**, which we traversed in an ancient, decrepit and filthy bus that bounced, lurched and jolted over rough roads in a most uncomfortable ride! I managed to achieve some very jerky film of dry scrub on a flat plain with black mountains in the distance.

The young lady was very proud to be in charge of my welfare and chatted to me incessantly throughout the entire journey, not one word of which I understood! I just kept smiling at her and saying ‘I wish I could understand you but I don’t’. Finally arriving at the town, where I had a reservation, I tried to tell the bus driver the name of my hotel, but he did not comprehend. Passing an establishment with ‘Hotel’ in the title, I tried once again to indicate what I wanted by using the Chinese word, but he deposited me at an alternative hostelry. Also dismounting, my kind companion engaged me the one and only taxi in town, which eventually transferred me to the correct establishment, where yet another problem arose – the hotel had rooms but no dining facilities because it was partially closed for the winter. However, opposite was a hotel with food service but no rooms, so it was arranged that I eat there, which proved an inconvenience in the freezing conditions! Next morning, out of the blue, the young lady turned up (of course she knew where I was staying) and began to harangue me with questions again. In the foyer of the hotel, I met a German speaking guide leading a group, so I took her inside and asked him to translate. He told me she wanted to take me to the **Mogao Grottos**, 25km southwest, but I had a tour already arranged so had to decline her generous offer. She contented herself with a picture of the two of us and left, but it was a special encounter.

—★— MOGAO GROTTO —★—

Carved into **Singing Sand Mountain**, the grottos themselves had a strict prohibition on photography because so much had been ransacked by foreigners over a period of years from the late 1800s. Similar to those described earlier and dating from the year 336, there were only 492 out of more than 1,000 caves left. As well as the 2,315 clay figures, the largest standing 33m (108ft), the grottos were adorned with 45,000 square metres of detailed murals, bas-reliefs and three-dimensional wall sculptures, and several thousand pillars were decorated with the lotus motif. The spectacular murals, if placed side by side, would measure 25km. The caves were abandoned in the 12th century when Dunhuang was no longer part of the trade route. This journey was also an adventure: crossing stony terrain with a few bare poplars, and passing perfect light-coloured sand dunes with knife-sharp ridges and windblown hollows accentuated by light and shade. Other sections were sculpted by wind into fine ripples, and the only thing to mar the surface was a set of camel tracks. A couple of these odd shaggy beasts were resting near where I alighted to take pictures, and far off, others were slowly plodding across the desert floor. Nestled at the base of a high dune, my guide and I came to a waterhole shaped like a crescent moon, and indeed called **Crescent Moon Spring**, with two horses standing near a solitary dead tree, a few rocks, and an endless tract of smooth sand etched into fascinating shapes, where the only foreign intrusion was my own shadow as I filmed the panorama. This was the real Gobi. It also made stunning photographs looking towards the sun, which split into rays of many hues. The only community we passed consisted of white row houses lining both sides of the road.

At the site, because there were no people around, I did manage to sneak some forbidden pictures of the mostly red-and-green murals (a touch of blue in one section) depicting patterns, people, and bird-like figures. I also filmed the striking seven-storey wooden pavilion built into the cliff face (much like at Datong, described later) and illustrations around the fretwork of its window grilles. The difference here was in the use of concrete to create some alcoves and recesses. As with the Longmen Grottoes at Luoyang, the complex was situated beside a wide (but only partially full) river, with stupa-like structures and a small rotunda containing statues near the banks. Pictures of the site from the opposite side of the waterway, with dry poplars in the foreground and sandhills towering behind, showed how extensive it was. I also saw some ancient mud-brick mileage towers.

—★— LANZHOU —★—

From Dunhuang, I flew to Lanzhou, over cracked and creviced, sometimes red-hued, but mostly duncoloured stony outcrops and hills with a little black relief. A river snaking away from a large incredibly blue lake provided an extreme contradiction as I filmed the landscape through the scratched windows of an ancient two-engine twin-propeller China Airlines aircraft (CAAC) – known in the trade as China Airlines Always Crashing! The environment changed to a patch of paddy fields as we landed briefly before continuing over miles and miles of barren wasteland, with fantastic sculpted sandhills, rounded windscored rock, and patches of ice around small blue lakes, which appeared incongruous in desert terrain.

Lanzhou again presented stark scenery, with deep gullies and sharply etched hills into which the adobe houses seemed to be absorbed. It was still cold, and en route to the city I visited a village cloaked in early morning mist, where men led donkeys beside a frozen stream and bare trees; the only other inhabitants I saw were a black pig, a dog and chickens. The waterway widened to a captivating vista of shining ice ‘flowing’ between sheer amber-coloured canyon walls with hills beyond. Surrounded by a few pines, a hilltop pavilion was an attractive sight, and my first view of the city was across the wide swiftly moving **Yellow River** – second longest after the Yangtze, travelling an incredible 5,464km (3,395 miles) – with the curled eaves of pavilions amongst the mud-brick and stuccoed buildings and a monument on a hill behind. As I paused to take photographs from a bridge, a man crossed with a pole bearing baskets laden with bright red chillies – a startlingly colourful intrusion on the drab surroundings.



TEMPLE WITH UNIQUE TREES

In the streets of the town, I found carcasses on a cart and hanging from hooks, fretwork around windows looking onto narrow alleys with wooden balconies overhead, and a beautiful stone carving depicting various plants, including the fruits and leaves of the grapevine. A group of people, all wearing gloves, was executing tai chi outside a red-pillared temple overlooking the dome and minarets of a mosque, the bridge, and the city sprawling on both sides of the river. I was taken to an extremely atmospheric ancient site built on a hillside and shrouded in fog, which added an air of mystery. Along with the usual attractive rooflines, moon gates, and bare trees, it featured a paved court containing red pillars, walls with

open brickwork, and fine old art on ancient wooden panels. These portrayed birds on leafy branches, a rooster with a hen, flowering long-leaved plants, and traditional Chinese mountain scenery. One entrance was illustrated with camels. Restored pavilions featured colourful patterns on ornately carved eaves, and ancient sculpted roof capping incorporated small floral spires. From higher up, I obtained a lovely view over these same rooftops, and even the trees were ancient. At the lower level again, a frozen pond with a dragon wall to one side and surrounded by bare trees, willows and pavilions, was crossed by a bridge and zigzag walkway. The entire scene was like something from an old sepia picture, the bland colour even repeated on hills beyond. A newer temple, with a metal urn in the forecourt, was draped in red banners.

I went next to the amazing pyramid-shaped hill of **Maiji Shan** (Wheat Stack), containing a series of Tang dynasty grottos and Buddhist sculptures cut into the cliff in AD 384–417 but buried, along with the treasures therein, by a violent earthquake in 734. However, although some 194 grottos had survived, a survey by Chinese archaeologists in 1952 found the site too dangerous to excavate and it was no longer possible to climb the precarious stairway up the face of the cliff. Nevertheless, from below I could easily distinguish guardians outside doorways and murals beneath overhanging ledges. A large sombre-faced Buddha was flanked by two with inscrutable countenances, and higher up, one of another group of three had been destroyed.

At a nearby village, with views of a very green valley, I saw paddy fields, cattle and a white pig beside a rivulet, crumbling adobe walls, contented cows munching on dried material in a yard, ladders against walls, a compound with a donkey and haystack, wooden doors in gateways adorned with tiles and Chinese characters, and everywhere corn hanging to dry. Larger beasts of burden (possibly mules) were tethered in a line beside a grey brick wall, a long-bearded man carried a large basket on his back, carts displayed twists of sweet-looking bread, and people were eating and drinking tea. Lying on the roadside, other wares included cane baskets, twig brooms, and some unrecognisable food product. Horses were labouring to pull wagons inundated by enormous haystacks, which brushed the road surface and appeared to be moving under their own steam, without the benefit of wheels underneath! Caged birds hung on a number of walls, and a man sat outside his front entrance together with a small child on a tiny chair, a pig snuffing around their feet. I saw another set of ancient pavilions, where old men accompanied by birds in cages were playing a Chinese card game. It became a common sight to see people carrying these feathered companions and congregating in parks to converse. Approached via an avenue of shady trees, another pavilion featured a panel showing deer amid foliage, an intricate carving incorporating a dragon, and screens depicting long-legged birds. In a street market devoted to fruits (mainly mandarins and apples), a man carried many chickens by the legs, others occupied the pannier of a bicycle, and carts, on one of which an old gentleman was seated, were pulled and pushed by hand. The roadway was lined by small open-fronted food stalls under sagging grey tiled roofs.

Travelling past extremely high rock precipices and across a wide river, I was taken to yet another temple, with a yellowish pagoda similar in style to those of the Wild Goose in Xi'an and extraordinary trees that I always identify with China, their twisted tracery of trunks and bare branches creating absorbing silhouettes. A monument in a large square sat opposite a massive pavilion, its red doors embossed with elegant Chinese figures in traditional scenes. I came across another exponent of the art of noodle making by the stretch and double method, the resultant strands plunged into boiling water and served almost immediately, and a man was preparing delicious-looking pancakes by spreading batter on a hot plate, breaking and spreading an egg in the centre, flipping, adding what appeared to be precooked fish, and applying sauce with a brush before folding. Another vendor was spooning meat chopped on a wooden

block into a type of pita bread, and a surprisingly neat mall, patronised by pedestrians and cyclists, was hung with Chinese paper lanterns. Many buildings had red pillars and signs in Chinese, but a modicum of decoration.

Lanzhou, on the south bank of the Yellow River, had more than its share of pavilions, but on the north bank, the complex of **Baita Shan (White Pagoda Hill; *baita* means white)**, with Ming and Qing dynasty pavilions and a tall multilevel Buddhist pagoda, had artistry even on roof capping. This took the form of dragons and large glossy orange ceramic flowers. Viewed between carved eaves of pavilions in the foreground, the pagoda made a fine picture, as did a striking bright red circular window screen, the only other source of colour on grey walls amongst bare trees. In the forecourt, reddish wooden doors and a few red lanterns graced the main temple, and the same colour was used on the eaves of small pavilions housing the enormous bell and drum, normally familiar inclusions that I had not seen since Xi'an. A large stela, metal urn, and stone lantern completed the picture, and metal lions stood outside the red-walled entrance to another temple, which featured gold studded red doors. Standing on a porch beneath heavily sculpted eaves, impressive larger-than-life guardians with ferocious faces and carrying weapons were enough to strike terror into the heart of many a wayward miscreant!

Extensive walls still encompassed part of the city, and from the ramparts I looked down on people riding through one of the gates and another of the many incongruous sights in this amazing country: at least ten billiard tables set up in the street, with people playing snooker as carts rumbled by, along with the constant procession of bicycles. Rural houses with uniquely shaped roofs had yards containing chickens, strings of chillies hanging to dry, carts, stacked saplings, baskets, and a donkey in a stable. Dried material like sugarcane or maize, used for fodder, was piled in a street. Hung with red lanterns, a tidy narrow lane led to sculpted panels, intricately carved doorways, fretwork on overhead balconies, and a serene pool reflecting a rotunda and humpbacked bridge; the scene was one of refined beauty mellowed with age.

Outside the walls, in a pastoral setting with a tethered cow sitting in the foreground, I stopped to film another isolated ancient structure having the appearance of a stage for itinerate actors. Back in the centre, I photographed the ornate entrance to a paved mall, and a brick façade with openwork panels depicting birds and red-and-white flowers. With snow now lying on the ground, yet another of the many ancient wooden temples featured stone lions, gnarled and twisted trees, *stelae*, enormous metal warriors, pavilions with carving on the curled corners of their tiered roofs (even on the ends of blue bamboo struts from which dried grass sprouted), and dragons winding around the wooden poles from which they were executed. Again, I composed a beautiful picture utilising a gateway for a frame. Except for the touch of blue and a few red pillars, all was the same dull grey as the overcast sky. I saw some delicate decoration beneath sagging eaves, a pond in an octagonal stone enclosure, bare trees, metal lions outside an entrance, a rotunda – and not a sole anywhere around.

—★— D A T O N G —★—

Boarding the train for **Datong**, we passed houses and stacked logs covered with snow, one man shovelling, another pushing a bicycle (but few venturing out), and a white landscape that included bare trees and shrubs literally appearing as if made of lace. To my mind, the **Yungang Grottoes** of Datong were the best of the four that I visited. Carved into the perpendicular northern face of **Mount Wuzhou** more than 1,500 years ago (AD 460–524), the 53 caves stretched one kilometre and contained 51,000



YUNGANG GROTTO, DATONG

Buddhist statues and basreliefs, the largest being the 17m (another source said 13.4m/44ft) seated **Sakyamuni Buddha**, with the familiar inscrutable but slightly amused expression. Lions graced the entrance to an ornate multilevel wooden pavilion built right into the cliff, its intricate eaves supported by verandah posts adorned with the antlered heads of gruesome mythical creatures. Snow lay on the ground, the curved roofs, and the mountaintop, and an attendant was clearing the latest fall from pathways to the caverns as I approached the most impressive, its entrance defined by substantial rock-hewn pillars. This contained a wealth of images on a red and blue background; larger figures with beautiful turquoise headdresses and sashes occupied recesses. Amongst the small figures were many-armed images like the Hindu god Shiva, and other caves housed several towering Buddhas with elongated earlobes, a couple with faint blue colouring on the dress. Smaller more-exposed unadorned niches and the statues they contained were without any colour but looked awesome against the lovely azure hue of the sky above. Altogether, the grottoes were an outstanding demonstration of devotion.

En route to visit a monastery, I stopped to photograph a blue tiled, three dragon wall, a glaring addition to the drab surroundings. Considered to bring good fortune, these were also a familiar part of Chinese culture and varied in size, but always with an odd number of dragons. Surrounded by snow and bare trees, a redwalled temple complex contained a blue wall with seven gilt dragons, which I filmed through a circular opening. Sadly, again I was unable to film any of the opulent interiors.



THREE DRAGON WALL, DATONG

—★— HOHHOT —★—

Arriving in **Hohhot** (Green Town in Mongolian), capital of the autonomous region of **Inner Mongolia**, interesting streets scenes included people rugged up against the intense cold, food stalls, and a jumble of hardware, with a light dusting of snow, completely obstructing the footpath: pipes, brooms, basins and baskets being amongst the clutter. Hovering overhead, a red, white and blue hot air balloon released showers of paper, a man was chopping meat, a tall red temple stood in the midst of shops, and a convoy of bicycles loaded with brooms was wheeled past. A monastery containing another large dragon wall also featured curled eaves adorned with these legendary beasts, as well as small decorative spires. Tall metal lanterns, their tops white with snow, stood in the courtyard.

In other street scenes, smoke plumed from chimney pipes and vapour from the mouths of people, and a row of carts sold, amongst other items, fruits, strings of garlic, and some type of green tied in bundles and covered with a cloth. Indicative of the industry of the region, one man (with earflaps on his fur hat) stood with a basket of coal, and snow cloaked the woodpiles and sagging roofs of derelict-looking buildings,

from a couple of which dry grass still sprouted. People stamped their feet against the cold, and most wore gloves. It was amusing to see puffed up chickens on window sills and huddled together for warmth on the bar, seat and pillion of a bicycle! Decorative window treatment consisting of colourful patterns inserted behind wooden grilles was a common feature of the town, and red washing on a line brightened the scene in a compound where a dog surveyed me with interest – but was too cold to bark! I saw sheep penned in one yard and loose in another, a big black sow in a sty, geese, metal drums, sacks of potatoes, heaps of snowcovered coal, bundles of saplings, and a donkey in an enclosure with crumbling brick walls. More geese strutted near a man drawing water from a well in the street, and I filmed many deserted alleyways. Snow lying everywhere even beautified mounds of rubble, making the depressing conditions appear pretty. I came upon more vendor carts, these stocked with strange greens, root vegetables, cauliflowers protected from the cold by a blanket, bread, and fish including a large red variety, which people carried threaded on string. A man wearing the familiar fur hat (the earmuffs sticking out) was marketing citrus fruits, another hardware outlet, with pans and copper articles amongst the brooms and so on, had ceramic bowls stored on the roof, and a man puffing at a smoking pipe stood selling produce from sacks beside the fire in a drum, the flu also belching smoke.

The **Huayan Sutra Pagoda**, also known as the **Ten Thousand Volumes of Avatamasake Sutra Pagoda**, but more simply **White Tower** because of its light colour, was an impressive eight-sided 45m (147ft) wood and brick structure. Built between 983 and 1031, it had embossed images around two lower levels, and with snow gently falling in a delicate white curtain onto the white environs from a white sky, it made a wonderful subject for pictures. A group of men were gathered beneath bare trees to trade sheepskins loaded onto bicycles, and from my hotel window I looked down on a garden with snow blanketing marble-railed stone bridges, covered walkways, rotundas, a frozen stream, and trees. These included a few evergreen firs but the remainder, even the willows, were denuded of leaves. I ventured into it but was soon forced back by the bitter cold; my numb fingers could not even operate the camera so I beat a hasty retreat indoors. It was actually the last time that I was to use the movie camera because conditions caused something inside to crack.

An attractive temple with an unusual cupola made a nice backdrop to breads and biscuits being displayed on upended baskets, and a couple of people sold oranges and bananas outside shops with smoking chimneys, artwork under eaves, and red woodwork. A grey brick wall was illustrated with large paintings of a tiger, a man on horseback, a warrior figure, and traditional Chinese scenery. I found a complex of single-storey pavilions with simple roof decoration, and even shops featured the red pillars and roofs with curled corners. Bicycles and carts were prevalent, but I saw no cars in the icy conditions. Another unusual temple, guardians in relief around its base, had several tiered spires adorned with myriad Buddha images.

—★— BEIJING —★—

Flying over a sea of white, with mountains completely enveloped in snow, I finally reached **Beijing**. With a history dating back 3,000 years, and China's capital since the reign of Genghis Khan in 1215, it was the last port of call in this huge country. My first visit was to the vast **Tiananmen Square**, largest city square in the world, with pavilions atop the monstrous red walls of the **Forbidden City** or **Palace Museum**. Commenced in 1406, this Imperial Palace of the Ming and Qing dynasties is reputed to have had 9,999

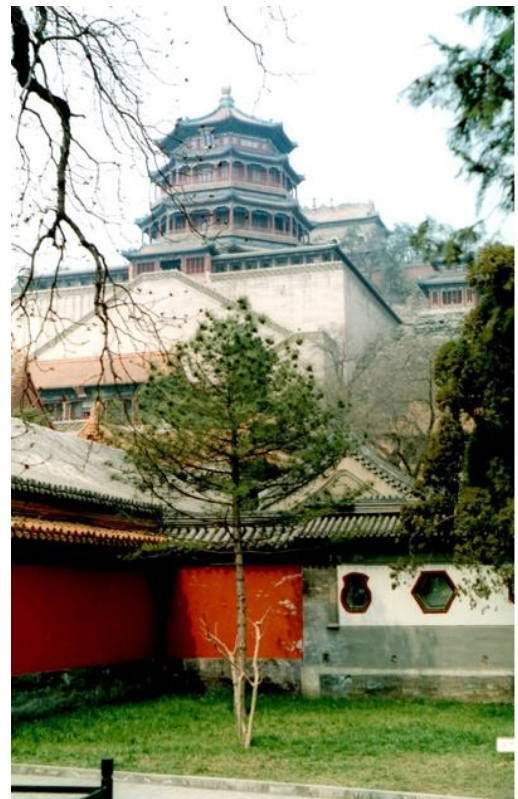


DRAGON SCULPTURE, FORBIDDEN CITY

rooms (actually a misconception) in 800 buildings and covered an area of 180 acres. On top of an unusual carved column, a dragon stood guard before a bridge to the main **Gate of Heavenly Peace**, still with a portrait of Chairman Mao overhead. Inside the gate, I photographed the buildings through arches and the beautiful lacework of bare branches. A series of white marble bridges led to pavilions in front of which sat large metal lions wearing the green patina of aged copper. As distinct from summer, when crowds flew kites in the main square outside the walls, there were few people in the immense snow-carpeted courtyard. Steps flanking a mammoth sculpted panel featuring dragons in high relief, led to more pavilions, and other large metal objects included a crane or heron, a turtle, lanterns, and huge gleaming bowls. Doors were embossed with delicate gilding, and carving beautified tops of marble railing. A red wall with green enamelwork was located behind a golden lion, the claws of its right paw clutching a gold orb, and tiny animals decorated roof ridges, but for such an enormous and important venue it was surprisingly simple. The white stupa of Beihai Park was visible over rooftops, and gnarled trees surrounded pavilions that graced the city's gardens at the rear. Flowers, animals and leaves were etched into paving, and a kneeling copper or brass elephant guarded the exit. The Palace Museum is described more fully in the later chapter on China.

The frozen moat, a venue for pleasure craft in summer, made marvelous pictures with the green willows, now just a network of fine branches, framing the high walls and pavilions. This brought me back to Tiananmen Square with the 36m (118ft) **Obelisk** and massive **Monument to the People's Heroes**, depicting figures of soldiers, peasants, workers and women from the 1949 Communist Revolution.

My next visit took me to the Qing dynasty **Summer Palace**, now a public recreational area on the shores of **Lake Kunming**, with pavilions, temples, rotundas and bridges set in splendid gardens. Being winter, the lake was frozen, a fact of which the populace took advantage to ice skate. I was greeted by a dragon-like folkloric beast with antlers, and a stone bridge led to a small island from which a gleaming golden path, created by the lowering sun, crossed the ice. Skaters in front of hills with pavilions lodged amongst bare trees were the subject of more good pictures. Snow lay on roofs, a number of which were enhanced with tiny animals, and traditional art graced a few walls. Filmed behind naked branches, an elaborate pagoda and a pavilion with decorated eaves and roof capping made stunning pictures, as did a small humpbacked bridge with a rotunda on top, in the middle of the lake. The 7,228m (7,655 yard) **Long**



SUMMER PALACE

Corridor was a covered gallery full of frescoes with mythical themes, and the ultimate in kitsch was the Empress Dowager's white marble paddle steamboat 'marooned' in the ice beside a pathway bordered by lotus-topped pillars, its vibrant stained-glass panels striking when lit by the rays of the setting sun. More lovely bridges, pavilions with red posts, and bare but still graceful willows made for excellent photography. Twenty-four emperors ruled from here, each of their imperial edicts concluding with the traditional exhortation 'Tremble and obey'! The turbulent history of the capital makes fascinating reading but is too long to relate in these pages. My next destination necessitated a train trip from the city, but unfortunately I have forgotten the name, although it was obviously another palace, with pavilions, pagodas and bridges in an ocean of white. Ice crystals on glass created amazing patterns that glittered in the dim light. There were a few evergreens, but in the main, except for the orange orb of the low lying sun, the environment was a monochrome shade of grey. Beautiful reflections, which were missing at the Summer Palace, appeared in a patch of motionless unfrozen water.

I visited two mammoth monasteries in a built-up area, the first with a multilevel red temple, tall metal lanterns, many stupa-like structures on rooftops, red-and-white buildings, a monk in maroon robes, and fretwork screens. From afar, the enormous lamasery looked like a miniature Potala Palace in Lhasa and was obviously Tibetan in origin. Shining green tiles decorated a red wall with elaborate pavilions above its arched gateway and a stone lion in front. Wearing a crown, a life-sized stone elephant with long tusks knelt in a court, its forelegs bent forwards in an impossible angle at the knees. The roof of one pavilion was adorned with the undulating serpentine bodies of slender dragons, and there were tiny animal figures and temple bells on the corners of eaves. A towering green pagoda completed the excursion. The return journey passed rural housing, high mountains, a partially frozen river running through a gorge, and many fields spread with a cloth of low-hanging mist.

Next, I went to the remarkable **Temple of Heaven** (also described later), where I entered through a series of carved stone gateways and filmed the various round pavilions through successive arches, the final ascent to the **Temple of Prayer for Good Harvests** reached via steps between tiered railings. The smaller of two ornate halls, the **Imperial Vault of Heaven**, contained tablets of the gods of the firmament and elements: sun, moon, stars, rain, wind, thunder and lightning. Built in 1530, it also had a **Whispering or Echo Wall** where, by speaking to the stonework, one could telegraph their voice to a person some distance around it.

I visited a pet market, where I saw birds in a cage suspended from the handlebars of a bicycle, people inspecting and haggling over goldfish in plastic bags of water, other fish in basins or jars, and grey or white rabbits just sitting on top of a basket. I went to **Beihai Park**, begun in the tenth century, with its **White Dagoba** (*stupa*) and **Temple of Everlasting Peace** (both built in 1651), pavilions, bridges and willows, but the foggy conditions prohibited good photography. A Chinese opera was performed in an open pavilion, the artists in red and pink costumes with ornate headdresses, and on the frozen lake, a large group of skaters executed professional-looking manoeuvres that included impressive spins.

One could not visit China without seeing the **Great Wall**. Constructed more than 2,600 years ago, it stretched over 5,400km, with watchtowers at strategic points. Being winter, it was comparatively devoid of the summer crowds and exuded a wonderful ambience, with views of the wall snaking over undulating hills and mountain tops before disappearing into the distance. It was wide enough for five horsemen to ride abreast, and in places I was surprised at how steep it was. The impact of its concept and achievement was made even more remarkable by the terrain; set in a landscape of snow, bare trees, and austere

mountains, it projected an even more daunting spectacle. My last tour was to the **Ming Tombs**, with impressive larger than-life statues lining the **Triumphal Route** or **Sacred Way**, their job being to guard and advise the emperor in the afterlife.

On the banks of a great river in the province of Cathay there is an ancient city of great size and splendour so wrote Marco Polo, the first 'tourist' in Beijing.

Interesting facts: the remains of the first known human settlement, dating back to 700,000 BC, were found southwest of Beijing; Mandarin is the world's most commonly spoken language, followed by Spanish, English and Hindi; China gave the world gunpowder, paper, printing, and the compass, and despite being the largest country on earth, there is only one time zone; chopsticks are the oldest form of eating utensil and China manufactures 60 billion disposable pairs each year, the equivalent of some 25 million trees!

In conclusion, I found travel in China to be challenging and frustrating, yet enlightening, exciting, and at times even amusing.