

Grassland and Cold Mountain

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Educational Tourism in China

Flight number CA¹⁷³~~174~~ from Tullamarine to Sydney is delayed. For once, this is not due to the Clerks' Union, beloved of the right, calling another strike against their being given the opportunity to learn Japanese, but because Flight CA17~~4~~, the incoming flight from Beijing, has been delayed. The incoming passengers later inform us that the aircraft had also forgotten to take any water on board, and so for their 14-hour flight they have had nothing but bottled drinks and dry toilets. Some of the delay in leaving is presumably ^{due} ~~due~~ to airport staff having to swab out these toilets. The delay leaving Sydney is, however, due to groundstaff who are still loading the Qantas dinner packs after the passengers are seated. Mass travel makes us citizens of one world. Our journey is to Beijing, to take part in the first Conference on Australian Studies in China, at the Beijing Foreign Studies Institute.

The trip to Canton, or Guangzhou as it is ^{now} known, is fine, with Qantas food, Chinese grog and a Monkey movie on the screen. I am a little worried, however, when my fellow-travellers prefer Coca-Cola to everything else. At least Monkey's monk likes pure water, preferably from a mountain stream. He shares with airline passengers, however, the inability to do anything for himself, although his mountain pony gives him

considerably more freedom to move than does an airline seat. On the scale of leg-room, China Airlines rates halfway between Qantas and British Air. No doubt Gareth Evans will get rid of that extravagance when he sells Qantas to John Elliott.

Pleased to meet other members of our party at Sydney, and to see Donald and Myfanwy Horne boarding the same flight. Donald is heading a cultural delegation returning a visit to China, and we see him several times during our stay - opening an exhibition of Australian photographs, opening our conference, at an embassy function, at Guangzhou airport as we are all finally leaving the country. Not so pleased, though, to find he is travelling economy. It is good to know that our bureaucrats are saving our taxes, but Donald ~~has~~ been working hard for us, travelling in difficult circumstances around China, and by the end of his trip is looking tired, elderly and unwell. To consign him to economy is an insult to us, to him and to the arts. Two ministers, Button and Duffy, are in China at the same time, presumably ratifying their advisers' arrangements. I don't envy their schedule - yesterday Brazil, today Beijing, tomorrow Brussels, and scarcely a human to talk to anywhere. Still, I bet they didn't travel economy.

There are rumours that Button will be at one of the openings, but he doesn't make an appearance. Duffy is at the Embassy reception, where he speaks with some sincerity of the need for closer economic and cultural ties between the two countries. Later, the ambassador announces that Australia has agreed to extend \$400 000⁰⁰⁰ worth of trade credits to China. This should prop the share market up for a while, boost a few

executive salaries, and maybe even create one or two jobs in Australia. It is certainly welcomed by the Chinese, who are committed to opening their country to the world.

Where this opening will lead remains unclear. It will enable China to realize its potential as a world power. It is however difficult to know what this will mean for the people or country of China. They could follow the example of India, and nurture an elite whose abilities and living-standards will match those of the west while leaving their countrymen in poverty and the environment destroyed. The films we see on state television look like a rerun of the fifties, except that instead of all problems being resolved in the last reel when the hero finds revolution and joins the Party, he now finds private enterprise and joins his relatives to run a successful fishstall. No doubt the producers are now marketing their series to the New Right in the west.

We are told that the young Chinese are interested only in learning English and getting out of the country to enjoy the affluent west. But the students we talk to when they are at last allowed in at the end of the conference are curious, eager to learn, idealistic -- quite unlike their western counterparts. They are free to publish their own papers, read Freud and Nietzsche, but complain that their professors try to put these writers back into a Marxist framework. The speakers who talk about Australian trade and economics, however, peddle exactly the same solutions as their counterparts at home: we must work harder, reduce the cost of labour, and sell our raw materials to

Asia. No-one raises the issue of how everyone can get wealthier in a world with finite resources.

The wind in the Forbidden City is straight from Siberia, and gives me a new understanding of Ivan Denisovich. The rectangular patterns lead from the solemn pavilions and spacious courts into more and more intricate mazes of mystery and intrigue. The outside world that was ruled from here is mirrored in the abstractions of power by which the mind builds its own prison.

Beijing streets are orderly but crowded. Buses and trolley cars are packed, cars and trucks move slowly, but most of the population goes by bicycle. Most of the old housing has been torn down to make way for high-rise housing. The city holds over a million transients, and we see a few country men standing beside with their bedding rolls and holding traditional tools as they hope for work. None, however, remain on the streets at night, at least as far as we can see. We are told that squatting is forbidden, and the transients find accommodation with relatives. If the four modernizations are ever to bring western standards to these people, they will have to tear the city down yet again to find space for the cars.

At the Beijing zoo tourists rush through the front gate, rush to the panda cage and snap a couple of rolls of film, or shoot another length of video tape to take home to bore the folks, and rush back to the waiting coaches. Beyond this triangle the paths are filled with Chinese enjoying their day out. Groups of parents and grandparents each revolve around a single brightly dressed child. The policy of the one-child family seems to be working. While these groups do the rounds of

the animals, courting couples occupy the seats. The sombre housing blocks do not seem to offer much opportunity for romance.

Nick Jose, the novelist who is now cultural attaché at the Australian embassy, tells us that Europeans in China have a saying: "Come for a week and write a book. Come for a month and write an article. Come for a year and write nothing." He has taught here for a couple of years previously, speaks Chinese with apparent fluency and evident good humour, and has written a book. He talks about Australians in China, starting with George Morrison's trek from Shanghai and his book published in 1895, and his later honourable opposition to Billy Hughes' part in the western betrayal and humiliation of China at Versailles. He finishes by reading from his book an account of a peasant boy coming to Beijing from his mountain village. The Chinese agree that he has got the details exactly right. The boy's determination and bewilderment, his sense of the crowds, the well-meaning help, the total break with tradition. Beijing may not be China, but it is a part of the Chinese future. The peasants have to make their place there as much as in the merchant cities of the coast.

Fay Zwicky talks about the influence of Chinese thought, particularly Buddhist thought, on some Australian poets: Rosemary Dobson, Randolph Stow, Dane Thwaites. These writers have responded to the inwardness of Chinese poetry, its celebration of a sensuous world in which the speaker still retains her sense of herself. She contrasts Buddhism, which regards the senses as windows looking into a world of unreality, with Taoism, which

sees them as "doors through which the free soul flies to blend with the colours and shape of the universe." Like Australian poets, Chinese poets deal only obliquely with personality, preferring to write of friendship, the land, the drinking mate. In the work of Han Shan, the Cold Mountain poet, or his translator, Dane Thwaites, this becomes a poetry of alienation. For Fay herself, travel seems alienation. The bleak skies and brown dust of Beijing press on her, disorient her. Her words construct her own cold mountain refuge to heal the rawness of the senses.

Over tea, and again at dinner, we meet a number of Chinese writers. Yang Xian Yi is at present translating Homer into Chinese. He suggests that he and I may be of an age. He met his wife, Gladys, also a translator, at Oxford after the First World War, and they have lived in China since 1940. They have always kept an open house for students, writers, visitors. During the Cultural Revolution he was accused of spiritual pollution. He used to share his drink and cigarettes with his visitors. He was imprisoned, and their son was driven to suicide. Gladys tells us during dinner that she now fasts two days a week, and feels much better for it. Mr Yang responds that when he wants to feel better he drinks more alcohol. "It washes the food right down, you see." His friend, Wu Zu Guang, was expelled from the Communist Party last year. He seems very cheerful about it, is still writing and drawing a salary. His latest play is called The Great Wall. Its theme is how "We built the Wall to keep foreigners out, and it failed. But it succeeded in keeping us in." He expects the play to be performed later this year, and is

now working on a film script of it.

Li Yao is from Inner Mongolia, where he edits the literary magazine Grasslands. He gives a paper on the effect of translating Patrick White's The Tree of Man, which he says has shown him how to solve his own literary problem of exploring the inner life of his characters in the context of their historical experience. He is diffident, and reads his paper in Chinese, with an interpreter translating as he goes. His generation of writers, he explains, have undergone suffering and imprisonment, and have been required to write to a formula. I learn later that his father died during the Cultural Revolution, and that he himself, although not imprisoned, endured great hardship. His novel, he says, was about the settlement and industrialization of Inner Mongolia, and had similarities in theme to The Tree of Man, but in fact its characters are pale and the work "has no artistic charm." In White's words, he tells us, "I seem to have found the way I have sought for a long time", and in his next story he uses the movement of deer, the sight of snow and the movement of wind in the forest to symbolize the suffering of his characters. For Li, symbols are no admission of defeat before the unknowability of the world or the impenetrability of language, but a weapon with which to confront and so change reality.

Li likens The Tree of Man to a traditional Chinese painting in its attention to detail and its vivid and realistic descriptions. In translating it, he has been forced to learn how to combine realism and surrealism, and so escape from the simple realism which is no longer compatible with our age. On the other

hand, the psychology of White's characters, their responses to flood and fire, their knowledge of hardship and loneliness, elicit a response from the people of Inner Mongolia, whose experience still resembles that of nineteenth century Australia.

Australia seems a far and insignificant place from the ordered and bustling streets and the grey housing blocks of Beijing, where we can glimpse the excitement and the uncertainties of a society remaking itself. But the spaces of Inner Mongolia are only a thumb's breadth away on the map, a ten-hour train journey in time. In a world dominated by the madness of technology and revolution, haunted by fears of nuclear holocaust or ecological catastrophe, manipulated by secret policemen and money-shufflers, language seems to have lost its power to speak to our condition. We have the choice of ignoring it or losing ourselves in it. Yet perhaps, in the words of the grasslands or the cold mountain, the language of the poet and the novelist rooted in his own landscape but speaking to the world, we can still find an escape into meaning, a path back to sanity.