China, My China

In the summer of 1982, Ip Yeuk-Lam told me he intended in the autumn to take some members of his family on an extended and privately-arranged holiday in China. He asked if I would care to join. I naturally jumped at the chance. Yeuk-Lam had wide connections and considerable standing in the mainland and, if there were interesting parts not yet fully opened to outsiders, I felt sure he could somehow arrange access.

Besides, I had not been inside China itself since 1948, when I visited my aunt, Chau Miu-Yee, in Swatow after she had married a Chinese businessman there. What had been happening in my homeland since had tantalised me. I was more than keen to see for myself what had been achieved after Deng Xiao-Ping announced the opening up of the country to economic reforms at the end of 1978.

There had been so many conflicting narratives of what was actually happening inside the country by both pro-China and anti-China elements that I did not know what to believe. Some of the attempts at social and economic restructuring, like the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, had gone awry and must assuredly have had implications and unintended consequences for the country.

Inside myself, however, I had long felt a niggling sense of guilt. In 1949, my close friend and mentor, Chan Hon-Kit, had gone back to China with his newly wedded wife, Frances, to participate in the post-war reconstruction of the country. I had toyed with the idea of going back but got sidetracked by the more selfish ambition of university studies in America. That decision had left me psychologically and emotionally divided ever since.

After completing two degrees at Stanford by 1953, I made my way back to Hong Kong on an American Presidential Lines vessel. On board were also a fair number of Chinese graduates from other American universities, all heading back to different parts of China to help in the modernisation of their country. Their decisions to return reawakened my sense of guilt again.

It was clear that China was inviting Chinese from all over the world to contribute to the rebirth of the nation. I could have, though belatedly, still answered the call. But I had been troubled by too many reports of killings, imprisonments and suicides during the course of the Three Antis Campaign against the evils of corruption, waste and bureaucracy in 1951 and the subsequent Five Antis Campaign in 1952. Travellers moving

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between Hong Kong and China every day also brought back tales of privations, hardships and the loss of personal freedoms. So I hesitated again.

At the same time, I began arguing mentally with myself. What would a person expect during a revolution? I remembered the chaos and the corruption and the stratospheric inflation I had found in Canton in 1947 when I was staying briefly with my mother. The last had wiped out my mother's modest savings. A revolution was not a tea party, Chairman Mao had asserted. It seemed right that a citizen should make sacrifices for the good of the nation and for future generations.

I thought the best way to cut through my indecision was to get an objective assessment from people I could really trust. Chan Hon-Kit and Frances seemed the obvious candidates. They had lived through changes from the very start. So I tried to contact them. But nobody knew where they could be found in China. During that interim, destiny took over and sent me in quite a different direction.

In 1958, when I was working for the *Straits Times* in Singapore, I met in the home of a friend a Malayan Chinese woman slightly older than myself who had actually answered China's call to return to develop the nation. She might be described as a liberated bourgeois woman of respectable means, who was also rather voluptuously configured.

When I met her she was dressed in one of those casual cotton suits worn by Chinese women in the tropics known as a *sam-fu*. But the outfit had been custom-made, to show to advantage her physical attributes. She had been sent by her family during her teens to study at a boarding school in England, after which she — in rapid succession — got married, gave birth to a daughter and secured a divorce.

She then took her daughter, together with her fur coats and her fashionable high-heels, to China to participate in the country's modernisation. I imagine she might have thought naively that, after having grown up under British colonialism, she would have the chance simply to continue a bourgeois Bohemian lifestyle under a Chinese flag.

It was unclear whether she realised that her mode of living constituted the very "yellow culture" China was trying to eradicate from the brave new world being created for socialist heroes. Apart from being bilingual, she had no other qualification or skill. It should come as no surprise that, only after a short and unhappy stay, she should leave the country disillusioned. Her name was Liao San.

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One day, shortly after I had met San, she favoured me with a vampish "come hither" look and the gift of a copy of a book she had written called *Peking Blues*. It was about her disappointing China interlude. I accepted the latter but I played at being too obtuse to respond to the former.

At 29, I had never been slow in accepting a dalliance with a woman of experience. I was, however, at that time engaged to be married later that year and I was acutely conscious that the lady who had introduced San to me was a bosom friend of my prospective mother-in-law. Any untoward deed by me would inevitably be transmitted in whispers to her ears. Under the circumstances, discretion trumped the inclinations of the male libido.

Peking Blues was an eminently forgettable book. It detailed San's efforts to take care of her ailing daughter, to unsuccessfully badger officials into allocating her a suitable job, and to conduct a rather banal affair with a married Chinese official.

San's book, nevertheless, did ease my feelings of guilt over not having rushed back to China much earlier. On reflection, I realised I had no real contribution to make either. My Stanford degrees were pretty worthless in China. What the country needed were agronomists, bio-chemists, engineers, architects, scientists, doctors, seasoned administrators and the like. What I could offer were merely footnotes to certain aspects of history and philosophy. And China already had far too much of both.

From that point onwards, I reined in my desire to become part of the forces for change in my country. It was just as well, for what could I ever have contributed during the Great Leap Forward in 1959 or the three-year long Great Famine which followed hot in its heels? And later still, the utter turbulence of the Cultural Revolution?

At the same time, I recalled the report of an interview that Arthur Waley, the eminent British translator of Chinese and Japanese classics, had given to a journalist shortly after World War II. Waley had taught himself Chinese and Japanese though he could speak neither language. Neither had he ever visited either country.

But he had done fine translations of the *Analects* of Confucius, the *Tao Te Ching*, the *Journey to the West* — under the title *Monkey* — and the *Book of Songs*, besides writing books on the lives and times of the Tang poets Li Po and Po Chu-I. He had also popularised Chinese poetry among the general British public — and particularly among the then Bloomsbury literary set — by publishing in 1918 a book titled *A Hundred and Seventy*

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Chinese Poems.

When the journalist asked whether he was ever tempted to visit China to see what the country was really like, he replied unhesitatingly in the negative. He said the China he knew through its literature, painting, music, innovations and crafts had been one of perfection. Why spoil all that with reality?

That gave me the idea that I could also create in my mind and heart a China to my own liking, a China without any of its ruder and more jarring realities. So I pieced together elements from Chinese history, literature and the arts as building blocks, selecting my favourite poems, epigrams and proverbs and such random samples of landscape paintings, Sung celadon, Ming stem cups and jade artefacts I had the good fortune to admire in some of the greatest museums in the world.

I would add as part of that imaginary world a few realities that I had to hand, like the antique seal stones my father had given me. Whenever I handled one of them, I would marvel over being in possession of something once owned by somebody three or four hundred years ago. And those ancient seals, with or without a *niou,* with or without a side inscription to indicate provenance, and engraved with characters in either relief or intaglio, would also enrich the secret world I was constructing.

Over time, further elements accrued. For example, when my photographer friend, Patricia Fok Lai-Ping, presented me with copies of her books of pictures filled with evocative images of China, they too became included in my imaginary world.

Patricia, who described herself as “a Chinese girl with a camera” was in fact the eldest daughter of Fok Ying-Tung, a Chinese patriot and a Hong Kong billionaire. Her father was a member of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress and a Vice-Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. His political status enabled Patricia to gain access to parts of the country at the time closed to outsiders.

Patricia and I shared a few things in common. We both had received significant parts of our early education in foreign lands but had something indubitably Chinese in our blood which we could not shake off.

Patricia’s handiwork often featured the misty beauty of Chinese landscapes, like the Yellow Mountain or the hills of Kweilin. It has been said that Picasso got his inspiration for cubism after seeing a series of photographs of Kweilin’s hills at an exhibition, with individual hills taken

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from different angles and perspectives.

Her photographs affected me differently, however. They stirred in me ancient lines of Chinese poetry and memories of how, during my rebellious boyhood, Tutor Tam had tried to drill me into remembering the names of China's five sacred mountains and its four crucial rivers.

Once I had begun creating my idealised China, a place inhabited by benevolent rulers and contented citizens, with each trying to cultivate the inherent goodness in himself or herself, the actualities in the real China slipped away from the centre of my attention. The Five-Year Plans, the targets they set, the endless slogans and the mischievous disinformation pumped out by the propaganda machines of the Cold War, all largely ceased to engage my interest.

Another reason for my indifference to such matters was my more pressing need to extricate myself from a disastrous marriage and its unhappy consequences.

Thus when Yeuk-Lam asked me to join his family on a holiday in China, the invitation came at a very opportune moment. I had not only been divorced but my children had all gone off for education overseas. Indeed, my eldest son was then about to graduate. I was, in addition, retired from the trammels of public service and at the start of a new career in commerce.

But what was the most crucial spur for me to see the real China was a further severe attack of acute pancreatitis. I had gone on a visit to the Li & Fung branch office in Taipei early in 1982 when, on my way back, I suffered another sudden attack, causing me to collapse in agony at the Chiang Kai-Shek Airport. That brought home to me that human beings were mortal and that if I did not engage with the real China soon I might well quit the world with only my imaginary China accompanying me to the beyond.

That was why Yeuk-Lam's invitation was so timely. So I quickly applied for one of those "home visit" passes for returning to China.

When my ex-colleague in the Home Affairs Department, Chia Chi-Pui, heard that I was heading for China with Yeuk-Lam, he quickly asked whether he could join in as well. Since his Mandarin was much better than that of the rest of us, his participation was welcomed with alacrity.

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And so it was that a group of a dozen of us headed into China in the autumn of 1982. The group comprised Yeuk-Lam and Suze, their eldest son Shing-Ki, who was a Federal Canadian Immigration official, their youngest son Shing-Kwan, a doctor, and his wife Maureen, a nurse, Chia Chi-Pui and myself, with some predominantly female friends and relatives making up the rest.

Yeuk-Lam was never a man to do things by halves. For the first half of our trip he had secured as our official guide the services of a Cantonese in his fifties. The man had a slightly melancholy look but once he started performing his duties it became clear he was learned in Chinese architecture, landscaping, social customs and history. My guess was that he must have been at one time an intellectual of the old school, before political imperatives reduced him to a more humble mode of earning a living as a tourist guide.

Yeuk-Lam also had great foresight in another important matter. He saw to it that our itinerary placed the group on the banks of the Chientang River, close to Hangchow, around the Mid-autumn Festival so that its members could witness the tidal bore rushing into the narrowing bay from the sea.

The tidal bore was reputed to be the largest in the world, sometimes rising as high as 12 metres. And daredevils would set out to sea in small boats beforehand, in order to ride the surf in. For centuries, people from all over the country had been gathering there each year to watch those spectacular sights.

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Ip Yeuk-Lam and the author, together with Shing-Kwan and his wife, Maureen, waiting with the crowds on the banks of the Chientang River for the tidal bore to arrive.

* * *

The next destination for the group was the ancient fabled garden city of Hangchow, described by centuries of writers as a paradise on earth. The pliant beauty of the place, ringed by hills and forests hosting temples by the hundreds and blessed by the presence of the West Lake with its strategically located islets, appeared to wear its antiquity with an astonishing air of dignified insouciance. The beauty and the mellowness of the setting took my breath away. They exceeded all that I had ever imagined that a 2,100-year-old city to be. They brought to mind the lines by the great Sung poet Su Tung-Po:

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"The light of water sparkles on a sunny day;
And misty mountains lend excitement to the rain.
I like to compare the West Lake to 'Miss West',
Pretty in a gay dress, and pretty in simple again."

Hangchow had indeed been fortunate to have had Su living there after he had been Governor of West Chekiang Province in 1089, at the age of 52. He took an intimate interest in all the affairs of the city.

Two and a half centuries before him, another great poet, Po Chu-I of the Tang Dynasty, had also served as its Governor. Po Chu-I was one of the most prolific poets of that dynasty and was noted for poems depicting the sufferings of the common people and satirising greedy officials.

Both those poets had enhanced the natural loveliness of the city without disfiguring it, like planting willows along a lakeside park. The pathway along the park soon acquired the poetic name of "Listening to orioles among the willows".

The Chinese have such a pleasing way of naming things, always with a nod to nature or mythology. In Hong Kong, when left to their own devices, the Chinese had given streets names like "Spring Garden Lane" or "Tin Hau Temple Road". After Western colonisers came, however, their rampant individualism and egocentric ways caused many thoroughfares to be slapped with the names of inconsequential — and sometimes even undeserving — colonial bureaucrats.

The West Lake had a circumference of approximately ten miles. Po Chu-I constructed a causeway promenade running east and west near the northern shore of the lake, complete with pavilions and hump-back bridges, to provide for more convenient access between the two sides.

Su Tung-Po was to construct another promenade running north and south, near the western shore of the lake, two and a half centuries later. Those two promenades were named by the city's citizens after their respective creators. Both embankments have been boons to pleasure-seekers ever since.

But apart from being a poet and an administrator, Su Tung-Po was also an outstanding engineer. Two canals had been cut through the city to provide for barge traffic. But the seawalls built to prevent seawater from bringing mud and silt into the canals were in disrepair. That necessitated dredging the canals every three to five years at great expense and to considerable disruption to residents. Su Tung-Po devised a way of building

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a third canal and some locks to shut off the seawater at high tide but released it at low tide. Thus the seawater needed for the canal could be brought in without so much silt. Additionally, that arrangement increased the depth of the canals and improved navigation.

He then turned his attention to securing fresh water supplies for the city. The fresh water came from mountain springs, which was then brought by bamboo pipes to six reservoirs and to the West Lake. But those bamboo pipes were easily damaged, compromising the quality of the water.

Su Tung-Po remedied that by replacing them with strong clay pipes which were in turn protected top and bottom by flag-stones. But there was yet another major problem. He noticed that the capacity of the West Lake was steadily being reduced by a fast-growing weed. The weed was already covering almost half the lake. The remedy was to marshal enough labour to remove the weed, a simple though costly exercise. Yet none of his immediately preceding governors had attempted the task. He sought funds from the central government and the job was completed in four months.

He then hit upon an idea for preventing the weed from returning — by leasing out sections of the lake shore to farmers to grow water chestnuts. Those holding the leases would then automatically see to weeds not interfering with their crops. The income from the leases could then be used for the upkeep of the lake and its promenades.

It would be a mistake to think that Su Tung-Po’s contributions to Hangchow were limited to the foregoing. In fact, he did a great deal more. He established in that city what was probably the first public hospital in all of China. He was indefatigable in pursuing famine relief measures, human-hearted in dealing with law-breakers brought before him, and stubbornly opposed to unreasonable taxes being imposed by the imperial court.

It was no surprise, therefore, that he should be thoroughly admired and loved by ordinary inhabitants of the city during his time. Although he was a native of Szechuan Province, many citizens of Hangchow — even today — insist on regarding him as their own.

* * *

After entering Hangchow itself, our Cantonese guide’s knowledge of Chinese history and folklore splendidly manifested itself. He explained that the city’s landmark Broken Bridge had never been broken at all.

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People in ancient times gave the bridge that name because in winter snow often completely covered the balusters of the bridge, so that viewed from a distance the bridge appeared broken.

The bridge gained further prominence because it was featured in one of the four greatest Ming Dynasty romances and folktales called *Madame White Snake*. According to the story, the spirit of a white female snake had been meditating earnestly for a thousand years. As a result of that effort, it had gained the ability to transform itself into human form.

One day, after taking on the form of a beautiful young woman, the snake spirit encountered on Broken Bridge an orphaned shop assistant working for a herbalist. The two fell hopelessly in love and duly got married.

A Buddhist monk, discovering that unholy union, tried to break it up by revealing to the young man that his wife was actually the spirit of a white snake. But the two by then had become so enamoured of each other that the revelation did not deter them from continuing as man and wife. They eventually gave birth to a son who distinguished himself at the Imperial Examinations.

Likewise, when our Cantonese guide led us to the Ngok Fei Temple, he regaled us with many of the legends surrounding the life of that Southern Sung Dynasty general. Ngok Fei had been leading Sung forces against the invading Jurchens from the north but, when he was on the brink of success, corrupt and treacherous court officials caused him to be recalled and charged with treason.

During his denial of the charges, he removed his clothes to display four characters tattooed on his back which meant "serve the country with utmost loyalty". One version of the story had it that his mother had caused those characters to be tattooed when he was young to remind him of his duty. But the four characters were not enough to save him from being tortured and executed in Hangchow.

Subsequently, when the truth became known, high posthumous titles were conferred on Ngok Fei and, when the temple in his honour was built, kneeling effigies of the officials who had betrayed him were placed in the courtyard for future generations to mock. Thereafter, Ngok Fei came to be regarded as the epitome of loyalty in Chinese culture.

Our guide was well up on the lore of tea and tea drinking as well. He took the group to the Tiger Running Spring close to the city and told us that the quality of the water from that spring was reputed to be one of the best in

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all China. Connoisseurs of the local Dragon's Well tea, therefore always insisted upon its use when brewing tea.

* * *

For myself, the highlight of the visit to Hangchow came when our group visited the Sai Ling Seal Engravers' Society located on the western side of Solitary Hill. The Society was an organisation I had heard my father mentioned when I was young and again a couple of decades later when he bestowed upon me his entire collection of personal and leisure seals.

Seal carving was popularised by the first Ch'in Emperor when he had the Heirloom Seal of the Realm made to symbolise he had received the Mandate of Heaven. That heirloom seal was handed down through the subsequent dynasties for more than one and a half millennia until it got lost at the beginning of the Ming Dynasty. That caused some of the Ching emperors who followed to have numerous imperial seals made.

The Engravers' Society at Sai Ling had roots dating back to the Ming Dynasty, although it was not formally established till 1904, to devote itself to the seal-carving art. My father must have become acquainted with it upon going to China after finishing his secondary education at St. Joseph's Institute in Singapore in 1919.

His disappearance to China for a period of six years has remained something of a family mystery. Elders had said he had gone there to seek work. But upon my own belated introduction to Hangchow, it came to me that it had to be just the kind of scenic and agreeable place to captivate my father and keep him lingering there. In any case, he did not show up for further education at the University of Hong Kong till 1925.

The Society occupied spacious gardens and grounds studded with museums displaying calligraphies, stone rubbings and ancient seal imprints and kiosks selling seal stones, the oil-based vermilion cinnabar seal paste in lacquer containers and other paraphernalia associated with seal engraving. The superb "field yellow" and "chicken blood" seals on display in the kiosks, at a fraction of the prices prevailing in Hong Kong, simply blew my mind. Obviously, even at those bargain basement prices, the seal stones were beyond the purses of the locals.

I became suddenly afraid of admiring and coveting them for too long, for I understood at that instance the irresistible impulses that could

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sometimes overtake housewives in the midst of sales!

I therefore deliberately turned my attention to the small number of local people visiting the gardens and grounds of the Society. They were dressed uniformly in baggy clothes of blue, grey or green. But they appeared relaxed and contented as they went about smoking cigarettes, reading newspapers, taking in the scenery or playing chess. Should children accompany the adults, then dashes of red were likely to be added through their wearing the red neck scarves of the Young Pioneers.

Although the local people had a far more modest standard of living than the citizens of Hong Kong, young and old alike seemed to carry themselves with quiet dignity and confidence in the future.

The same could not be said of the citizens of the British colony at that time, however. 1982 was the time when Britain and China began seriously locking wills on the return of the territory to Chinese sovereignty. Scary rumours of dire outcomes emerging from those exchanges — some maliciously generated for short term advantage by one side or the other — were buzzing around the city more thickly than bluebottles around a rotting carcass. They so disturbed local sentiments that many of the more faint-hearted started pulling up roots and seeking foreign visas.

The tranquil views of the West Lake from the gardens came as a very pleasant diversion from those ill-informed rumours back home. As I took in those magnificent sights, it came to me they must have been the same sights that had captivated my father. Indeed, those very sights had probably remained largely unchanged for the last two thousand years!

On a more contemporary note, Chairman Mao was also fond of watching the play of the water on the West Lake from nearby gardens. He visited Hangchow often when he retreated from the bitter cold of the Peking winter, staying in Shanghai at a residence converted for his use at the former French Club.

The only detail obviously absent from the dappled waters of the lake after the Communist Revolution was the presence of the former flower boats, which used to be filled with courtesans plying the intelligentsia and officialdom not only with drink, music and dance but also with their ability to match couplets or to discuss philosophy and religion with the best of them. It was through such carousing with well-read courtesans that Su Tung-Po gradually perfected and popularised the *tse* form of poetry.

What has happened in our modern world that we should now have descended into the crudities of topless bars and naked pole-dancing joints?

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In eras past, fun and entertainment came with more imagination and greater erudition. I could only lament that I had been born too late to enjoy those bygone pleasures!

* * *

The next city on our itinerary was Soochow, in the neighbouring province of Kiangsu. Soochow, having been founded in 514 BC, was a much older and bigger than Hangchow but it was equally celebrated for its beauty. It was pleasantly located on the banks of Lake Tai, one of the largest fresh water lakes in China, covering 869 square miles. The city was also connected to the Yangtse River. A criss-cross of canals and ancient bridges ran inside the city, causing it to be known as the Venice of Asia. It was also linked to many other towns and cities by means of the 1,104-mile-long Grand Canal.

Soochow benefitted enormously from the trade generated by the completion of the Grand Canal during the Sui Dynasty. That project was achieved by connecting up a number of local canals along its route, some of which dated back to the fifth century BC.

Because of Yeuk-Lam's political connections, the top officials of Soochow hosted our entire tour group to a sumptuous meal on board a large launch as it cruised around the 90 islands in Lake Tai.

Because of the city's great age, it was only natural that it should boast a great many ancient monuments. Among them were two of the best preserved classical Chinese gardens in all of China — the Humble Administrator's Garden and the Lingering Garden.

At each our learned Cantonese guide was able to dilate upon the finer points of Chinese landscaping, on why there should be none of the sweeping views and grand vistas of Western gardening and why there was a need for diffused crooked walks and rhythmic curves. The aim was to reflect the simple harmonies of natural things and to offer as many arresting views as possible as a person strolled through the garden. To that end, objects outside a garden, like distant mountains or pagodas, might be incorporated to form part of a scene.

He also explained that some of the fantastically shaped limestone formations dredged up from the bottom of Lake Tai were much sought after by people keen to install rockeries in their gardens.

Wonderful as Soochow gardens were, the city had been associated in

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my mind ever since childhood with the atmospheric poem by the Tang poet, Cheung Gai, which had been anthologised in the standard primer *Three Hundred Tang Poems*. It was about a scholar passing through Soochow by boat and stopping near the Cold Mountain Temple while *en route* home after failing in the Imperial Examinations.

When I first learnt the poem as a child in Canton, it had been little more than mastering by rote a series of rhythmic sounds, with no real understanding of the actual meaning of the words being recited. It was only some years later, when I was studying under Tutor Tam in Singapore, that he explained the meaning of the words.

Still more years later, I tried to clarify with my father the precise imagery Cheung Gai was trying to convey in the last line of his poem. I wanted to pin down whether the poet sought to convey the impression of the failed scholar being in the boat in the middle of the night, unable to sleep, when he heard the bells of the Cold Mountain Temple or whether he had been out drowning his sorrows and only upon returning to the boat in the middle of the night did he hear the temple bells. On my reading, both seemed plausible.

“That’s the beauty of Chinese poetry,” my father replied. “Its terseness engages the imagination of the reader. Each line can be pregnant with allusions. What a reader brings to a verse would depend on his imagination and the breadth of his scholarship.”

It was inevitable, therefore, that after the group’s arrival in Soochow a visit to the Cold Mountain Temple had to be included. We strolled through its grounds and ran our hands in wonder over its ancient bronze bells. Outside the temple, we gazed contemplatively upon the two bridges mentioned in Cheung Gai’s poem and studied the fishing boats still moored between them.

It so happened that after our temple visit, while ambling through the venerable streets of the city, I spotted a shop selling writing brushes, sticks of ink and stone ink slabs. My eyes lit up when I saw on display an ink slab with a cover engraved with Cheung Gai’s poem in archaic small seal characters. I could not resist buying it there and then. That ink slab is still with me today and being used.

Writing about events which had taken place decades ago, I could not help wondering if engravers still carved Cheung Gai’s poem on ink slabs today. If so, do tourists still buy them? Or would they settle for one of those ubiquitous T-shirts with the Chinese characters for Soochow

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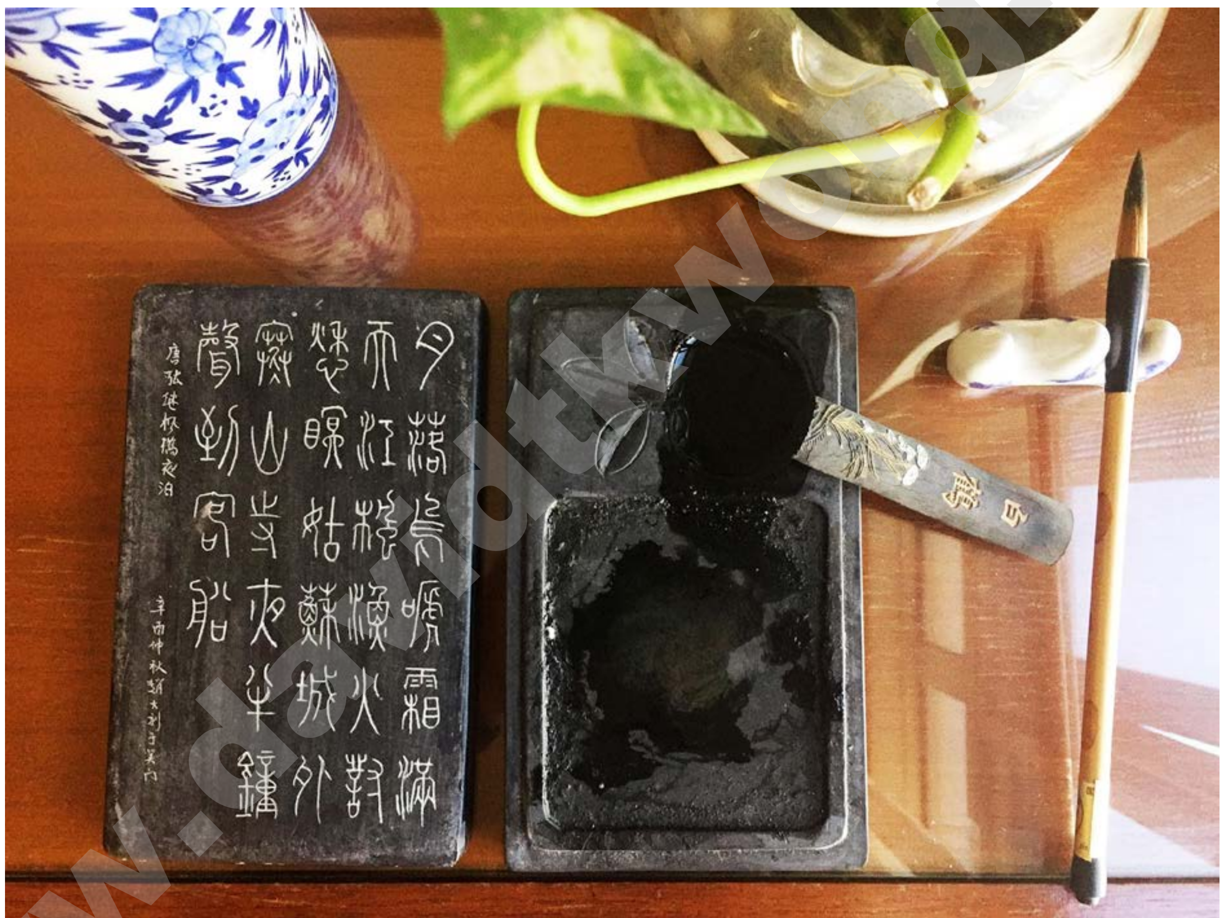
emblazoned across it or a plastic or plaster cast replica of the city's leaning Cloud Rock Pagoda?

* * *

The next place for the tour group to head for was Yangchow, another ancient city on the north bank of the Yangtze River which was in many ways similar to Soochow. It was founded around 485 BC and was filled with canals and blessed with many lakes and well-tended gardens.



The ink slab with Cheung Gai's poem carved in small seal script bought in Soochow

The attractiveness of its surroundings have been widely praised in literature. The romantic Tang poet, Tu Mu, had written the following lines about the city:

"After ten years, I awake from my Yangchow dream,
All I gained was a fickle reputation in the green mansions."

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The "green mansions" was a reference to the green tiled roofs in the city's pleasure districts. Alas, those pleasure districts no longer existed.

The most famous of the many lakes in Yangchow was called Slender West Lake. There was a garden next to it with a number of historical features, one of the most notable was a fishing platform called Diaoyu Tai. It was a spot favoured by the Ching Emperor, Chien Lung. He was partial to it because he always landed abundant catches there.

What the emperor did not know was that local officials, seeking to please him, had arranged on each occasion for divers to go beneath the waters to surreptitiously attach fishes to the imperial hooks! It appeared that emperors, like the common man, also had to be fed with a few illusions and dreams.

Yangchow, connected to other parts of the country by the Grand Canal and by the Yangtze River, thrived through being a centre for the salt, rice and silk trades. The city also had a reputation for its lacquerware, embroidery and its cuisine. Its gardens, like those at Soochow, exuded a Taoist air. They would feature pathways and nooks with eccentric names like "The place for cultivating friendship with the moon" or "The path and the bamboos lead to a place of mystery".

During the rule of the Mongols, Marco Polo claimed he had been appointed its governor, though later historians have speculated that his office was of a lower order.

The city had also seen its share of hard times. After the Manchus invaded China, the Ming Dynasty set up a short-lived capital there. But when the Manchu forces took the city in 1645, they went on a ten-day killing spree during which 800,000 of its inhabitants were said to have lost their lives.

During my various travels around the world, I had often eaten in Chinese restaurants in places as far apart as New York and Sydney, Barcelona and Rio de Janeiro, Toronto and Karlsruhe. In all of them, I had found on their menus an item called "Yangchow Fried Rice". Whenever I had ordered the dish, however, I discovered that the ingredients used in its preparation varied slightly from place to place. Therefore, finding myself in Yangchow, I was determine to establish what the genuine article tasted like.

But to my great chagrin, when I tried to order that dish at a couple of restaurants in that city, I was told that the dish was completely unheard of. The only fried rice dish that both places could offer was something called

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"Cantonese Fried Rice". I nevertheless ordered the local fried rice for comparative purposes and — lo and behold —each tasted pretty much like the Yangchow Fried Rice served up elsewhere.

Well, I suppose that showed what cunning marketing could achieve. Fried rice by any name had to taste just as fried. What an exotic world of illusions, brandings and self-deceptions we are increasingly creating for ourselves.

* * *

At the end of our group's stay in Yangchow, we had to bid farewell to our learned tour guide, for he had not been authorised to travel with us to Peking for the next stage of our holiday.

That proved a great disappointment for all of us, because most of us benefitted enormously from his comprehensive recitals of Chinese history and legends. So long as people like him continued to narrate orally the tales of the country's past and the notables who had emerged over the centuries, there was little danger that anything as ephemeral as Chairman Mao's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution could ever erase those stories from thousands of years ago from the hearts and minds of the common people.

Most members of our group had lived through the overspill of the Cultural Revolution into Hong Kong in 1967 and the disturbances it brought. We had got a sight of mob psychology at work and the human propensity for violence. Inside China the turmoil or *luan* had been more extreme. We had heard horrific stories of mass struggle meetings, accompanied by torture and deaths, fierce sectarian fighting, factories and cities brought to a standstill and indiscriminate destruction of cultural icons and relics.

Many of us had been left wondering just how tough a membrane had been developed for civil and considerate behaviour over five thousand years of Chinese civilisation. Was it strong enough to hold in check our enduring discontents and our secretive paranoia and madness? If that membrane were to rupture or be punctured, would a regression back to the laws of the jungle possess us again?

Modern Chinese history has not been very reassuring on that score, especially when the masses remained superstitious and not adequately educated. In 1850, a scholar who had repeatedly failed in the Imperial

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Examinations decided to reinvent himself as the younger brother of Jesus and to lead an uprising known as the Taiping Rebellion. Before it was put down with the aid of foreign powers in about 1864, it had cost somewhere between 20 and 25 million lives.

A serious drought in North China towards the end of the 19th century was followed by floods. Those natural calamities saw the rise of a little known secret society called the Society of Righteous Harmonious Fists. Its members believed that if the country got rid of foreigners, their Christian religion and their Chinese converts then the problems of the country would disappear. Moreover, those practitioners of martial arts claimed they had arrived at a stage of their training where they would be immune to the bullets of foreign guns. So they began killing foreigners and Chinese Christians.

Some of the officials in the Manchu Court unfortunately subscribed to their misplaced ideas and supported them. That set the scene for the bloodbaths of the Boxer Rebellion. The Boxers laid siege to the Legation Quarters for 55 days, causing eight foreign powers to join in sending an expeditionary force to free their diplomats.

The upshot of that demented episode was that several hundreds of foreigners and in excess of 30,000 Chinese Christians were slaughtered by the Boxers. In vengeance, the troops of foreign powers relieving the Legation Quarters unleashed fresh orgies of murder upon suspected Boxers as well as upon totally innocent peasants whom they took to be Boxers.

Another aspect of the bloodlust was that the foreign powers making up the expeditionary force demanded the execution of all court officials who had supported the Boxers. It was noteworthy that none of those officials sought to escape their responsibility. Having chosen a stand, they accepted their fate stoically. Some committed suicide while the rest turned up for their executions. If only modern officials and politicians were as ready to admit responsibility for their mistakes!

During the Cultural Revolution, there were many instances of demented activities as well. For instance, a detachment of Tsinghua University students broke into a lunatic asylum in Peking in the autumn of 1966 and found an inmate by the name of Chen Li-Ming.

Chen somehow convinced them that he had been locked up for criticising Liu Shao-Chi, Chairman Mao, Marx and Lenin. The students soon hailed him as a revolutionary martyr, wrote a play about him and sent him to address mass meetings from one end of the country to another. It

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was only in 1968 that Chen was finally sent back to the asylum. That showed that university students could go off the rails as spectacularly as the more poorly educated in a time of chaos and paranoia.

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Since our group happened to be in China long after such ghastly events, we naturally wanted to learn at first-hand details of how those who had lived through that "lost decade" of the Cultural Revolution had been affected.

But we had no opportunity to talk to ordinary people. We were, after all, not a group of social scientists or behavioural psychologists out to dissect the social structure of an emerging China. We were only a group of rather privileged tourists trying to escape for a while from the quotidian pressures of the get-rich-quick environment in Hong Kong.

On the face of things, we found nothing worryingly disturbing or regimented in the cities we had visited. The only mass activity we had spotted were gatherings of citizens in the parks, practising *tai chi* exercises.

But, of course, changes had indeed occurred. Urban life was far cleaner and the traffic more orderly than I had seen in Canton back in 1947. There were no beggars, mendicants and pickpockets in the streets and there was no air of impending doom of that time, when nerves were being jangled daily by runaway inflation.

In addition, the people of the cities we visited seemed quite relaxed as they went about their daily business. There was little motor traffic on the roads except for buses and lorries. Private cars hardly existed except for the odd Red Flag limousine conveying high-ranking officials on their missions. The ordinary citizen went about among the endless streams of bicycles. The tinkling of their bells were far more pleasing on the ear than the agitated blaring of horns in Hong Kong, when cars got snarled in traffic jams.

The demographics also seemed to have changed. There appeared to be more younger people around, with their faces eager yet relaxed, confident about their future. I would not use Chairman Mao's description that their faces shone like "the sun at eight o'clock in the morning" but they certainly did not carry the shut, harried look of many of the Hong Kong young, burdened with excessive homework or with overlong hours of underpaid employment.

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When the Communist Party came to power in 1949, the literacy rate in the country was probably only about 15%. Illiteracy must have been virtually wiped out by 1982, for everywhere young and old alike could be seen reading newspapers or books to while away their leisure.

People were not by any means affluent, measured by Western standards, but they seemed contented with their simple lives and there was not any obvious sign of hunger and malnutrition.

I remembered that during the years of the Great Famine the post office in Hong Kong had to work round-the-clock to cope with all the food parcels residents were sending to relatives inside China. That had become a thing of the past.

During our tour, our Cantonese guide took the opportunity to brief us about the efforts made by China to create a more egalitarian society. The social and legal equality between men and women had been written into the Chinese Constitution in 1954, he said. In 1965, all insignias of rank had been removed from members of the People's Liberation Army. A general was supposed to wear the same uniform as a private.

Then how would anyone know who was an officer and who was a common foot soldier, one of our group asked.

The guide smiled. There were in fact subtle indications for those in the know, he explained. One could draw inferences, for example, from the number of fountain pens a person had clipped to his breast pocket or whether his sandals were made of leather or plastic or the quality of the watch he wore.

"Wages are egalitarian too," he added. "I draw exactly the same pay as the driver of your coach. What does pay matter, when we are both working for the Revolution?"

I remain unsure to this day whether he had intended to reveal the slight wryness in his tone of voice.

As for myself, the tour we had had so far had lifted my spirits considerably. It was with a secret delight that I found that much of the material I had put together to form my imaginary China still existed in reality. I could relate to what I had seen and genuinely felt that a part of myself still belonged there, in spite of the sometimes erratic actions of its Communist rulers.

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I have noticed that Western journalists who have visited China nearly always make some play of the large number of slogans they found plastered everywhere. They inevitably point to them as an attempt by an authoritarian government to brainwash the populace. I therefore made an effort to note down the kind of slogans I had encountered.

Among the slogans I had seen during the tour of the three ancient cities were the following:

"Build the nation on thrift and industry."

"Love science, love hygiene, love labour."

"Protect the Motherland."

"Serve the Revolution."

"Strike down Imperialism."

"Fight Cultural Pollution."

"Struggle hard to implement the Five-Year Economic Plan."

I myself could not see much that was wrong with such exhortations. They seemed infinitely more sensible than the advertisements blazoned in Times Square in New York and Piccadilly Circus in London, urging people to guzzle more sugary or alcoholic beverages, to supersize their greasy hamburgers or to buy another fancy designer garment or a pair of shoes or a jar of alleged beautifying goo. Would such conspicuous consumption really dull the gnawing hollowness within the soul of the ordinary urbanite?

It was true that other slogans like "Long Live the Chinese Communist Party" and "Long Live the People's Republic of China" existed aplenty. They could be regarded as a form of indoctrination. But should they be considered more reprehensible than my being made to learn songs like "Onward Christian Soldier" and "Rule, Britannia" when I was a boy in a British colonial missionary school?

By the end of the first part of our tour, a sense of apprehension did creep into my thoughts, however. It was all very well to open China up to the outside world but would the country learn the right things from the outside world? Human greed was infinite. If a get-rich-quick mentality took hold and ran riot, would much that was fine and precious in Chinese culture not be severely compromised?

It was a frightening thought to imagine that one might one day enter a Soochow or Yangchow garden to seek communion with nature only to find oneself hemmed in by an overbearing forest of high-rises, complete with neon signs touting all the latest mass consumables and electronic gadgets.

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It might then be too late to regret what had been gained through modernisation and what had been lost.

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