

# The Sabbatical Journey - Part 1: China

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*What is it to live a God- Shaped life today? Does the transcendent still have meaning in people's lives? When religion is sometimes seen as part of the world's problems; wars, conflicts, terrorism and mindless acceptance of poverty, injustice and disease; all have been blamed on religion or religion has been used to justify or entrench such life destroying acts and thought processes. When we examine these problems, however, ambition, envy, fear and greed are the real root cause of such destructive action and thought. Power and wealth still are in the hands of a few and certain parts of the world, and this can lead to a growing rage, especially by those who are disenfranchised. Examining the world religions and faiths, one of the basic foundations in all of them is; 'treat others as you would be treated' and this is understood to go beyond our community and extend to enemies too. Such a principle could make all the difference in our world where international terrorism, financial crises and global warming show us how fragile and yet how interconnected our lives are.*

*Starting off in China, where Confucius ( 551-478BCE), when asked which of his teachings ought to be practised daily, had replied "Consideration" (or as it was explained further as never doing to others what you would not like them to do to you). Such right-minded thought can lift us above our own life, seeing the greater picture and valuing all life, taking one into the transcendent.*

## Part 1 of the Journey: China

We arrived at Beijing Airport on Easter Day, a party of 9 strangers who were now to become fellow travellers; Mike, a retired Army officer, his wife Trisha a sportswoman and teacher, Len, a retired fireman and Ann, a retired teacher, John, a retired teacher now in his eighties travelling by himself a veteran of specialist travel, and Simon a lawyer and Caroline a travel agent working for Club Med and Doug and myself.

As we travelled together we were to learn much more about each other, our life stories, our strengths and weaknesses, and we were to give each other support and encouragement along the way, looking out for each other and learning together and moving on spiritually in our lives.

We were met by Teri our Chinese guide, a young man, a recent graduate from Beijing University. The airport looked like any other airport but as we drove away along the fast motorways crammed with luxury cars and bicycle rickshaws we spotted the occasional older more traditional Chinese building hidden amongst the vast tower blocks.



We unpacked quickly at the hotel and used the ¾ hour that we had before meeting up with the guide and the others to literally run to Beijing Zoo, which we had spotted was just across the road, to look at the pandas. It was obviously a favourite day out for Chinese families as it was packed. We looked at them noticing how they often wore face masks to protect them from the smog and covered themselves up from the sun (so that they would not look like weather-beaten peasants, rather like the women in Jane Austen novels). They also looked at the two of us with some interest with our short sleeved tee shirts and considerable height and Western faces. We paid the equivalent of only £1.50 for the ticket and went straight to the panda

house. Of course there were so many other animals to see but somehow we just had to see the symbol of China in Beijing Zoo! One panda was looking very relaxed as she enjoyed munching her way through a huge pile of bamboo. Another was in a rather poor state, with discoloured fur (perhaps he was just very old) others were nonchalantly regarding the people with as much curiosity as we were regarding him.

The evening meal was fabulous, there were many fish dishes, including lobster and crab, and a great deal of pork served up in spicy chilli and other great sauces. When I asked Teri, whether the food was typically Chinese, as it seemed to us, he said that he thought that it was more Western style especially for us tourists!



Teri arranged a trip for us to see China at night, beginning with the Olympic Stadium, with the Bird's Nest designed by Ai Weiwei, who had recently been arrested, earlier in the month and not heard about since, "for political reasons". The designs for the Olympic buildings were quite stunning, with images of water, a dragon and cranes, using great flair and imagination. Teri, reflecting the will of his political masters, glossed over the missing artist. He did this on a number of issues, such as capital punishment, (China executes thousands of people, more people per year than all the other countries in the world combined, but the exact number according to Amnesty International's recent report is a state secret). Teri felt that the death sentence was a good punishment and cited the recent example of a promising young music student who had run over a woman accidentally but then, afraid that she might

identify him, he stabbed her to death. Many of his fellow students and teachers had written letters in his defence explaining that this was completely out of character and it was even his own mother who had taken him to the police but Teri said that in this case the death penalty was very appropriate! We were left with our own thoughts on this matter.

We were driven to a lake surrounded by restaurants and trees, decorated with hundreds of red lanterns. Red is an auspicious colour for the Chinese. The cafes were filled with young people and lots of music ranging from classical Chinese to modern western music. It was strange to feel that although we have always attended Church on Easter Day this Easter Day, at the beginning of our pilgrimage journey, we were not going to be able to as there was not a church in sight. We had come to one of the more secular, materialistic and consumer driven places in the world!\*

\*Protestantism that promotes success as God's gift to the faithful is increasingly being encouraged in China as it suits the economic climate.



*Consideration, as Confucius maintained, is still at the heart of the Chinese way of life. People show a great respect for one another and are very courteous. However politically, as it is such a large country with such a vast population and because they are so determined to develop, individualism as far as finance and commerce is concerned is encouraged but individuality is*



*discouraged for the greater good of the state.*

The next day was spent at the Summer Palace, Forbidden City, Tiananmen Square and Gardens. The gardens of the Summer Palace were stunning in the early morning mist, walking amongst the peach and cherry blossom and taking hundreds of photos. We then took a dragon boat to the other side of a lake. As we got nearer we could hear the sounds of loud and enthusiastic choral singing. Teri explained that it was a choir of pensioners singing patriotic and inspiring songs (it seemed to me not dissimilar to hymn singing). They had a conductor a few musicians and people joined in if they wanted to as well.



Tiananmen Square was vast and bleak, full of grey concrete, with haunting images in my mind of the massacre of the protesting students. At one end was the Mao Mausoleum, a building where the body of Mao is on show for people to file past. The guide said that those who went to see it misguidedly thought of Mao as a God and he informed us that now the time of Mao was seen as the time of "confusion". Opposite the mausoleum were two vast screens showing images of tourist China, livening up the square with its commercialism! We had a fun lunch, sharing a room with a lively bunch of Canadian school students on a drama tour, at a Chinese restaurant with the ubiquitous Lazy Susan centre with all its many dishes to share, and copious refills of green tea.

We then went to the Forbidden City which has been very much restored with its vibrant colours of red and royal colours of gold and blue. Teri pointed out how the main central gateways ( of which there were many) were reserved for the Emperor alone and even his wife was only ever able to enter through it once – on their wedding day! He also pointed out how huge the sums of money were that the emperors would have spent on these palaces and contrasted this with the grinding poverty of the peasants at the time. It seems that the situation is coming close to this huge discrepancy again, with many becoming millionaires but many still living in poverty, especially in the countryside. The cities are so popular it is now difficult to drive a car. During the Beijing Olympics in 2008, Beijing started a scheme whereby drivers could only use the road every other day – depending on their number plate and now they continue with this system as there are so many cars on the road. If you want to drive a car you are entered into a lottery to buy a number plate when you have passed the driving test. Teri had entered the lottery in October last year and he had still not been successful! After a Chinese evening meal with lots of small dishes to share, we had a great time at the Peking Opera. It was utterly charming, with great historic costumes, very different musically to Western music, very much more stylized, with an amusing translation which kept us in stitches. The heroine was not only an amazing singer she also was an expert juggler and acrobat, which is all part of the opera.



The next day we had a very early start to get to the Great Wall of China. The journey to the wall took us along crammed motorways, crowds waiting for buses, schoolchildren walking to school and dusty villages where the standard of living was very different from the city with far more bicycles. We reached the cable cars for the Great Wall but as we were so early it was wonderfully peaceful, a contrast to the hustle and bustle of city and even the village life we had seen on the way. The view of the mountains was breath-taking and the only others on the cable cars were a whole lot of men in army uniforms with sashes across their chest proclaiming the fact that they were the Green Army, there to protect the environment. It seemed quite a fun day out for them as they spent time taking photos of each other and were keen to pose with us Westerners who they regard as cute. The Wall was far better than any of the pictures in the guide books, stretching on for further than the eye can see, although not all is in good repair and the further away from the tourist areas the more broken down it is. There were many, many steps, some huge, some tiny – all rather random and it is certainly not in a straight line as it traces the highest ridges of the mountains.



In the afternoon we were given a tour of a silk factory, and we were shown the different stages of silk production and then given a tea making ceremony. Afterwards, in each case, there was the opportunity to buy but the prices seemed very high. We ended the day with a Peking Duck banquet

and the chefs ceremonially carved the Duck with pride at each table.

After a huge buffet breakfast at our high rise hotel we drove to Beijing Airport. Teri had a terrible hangover, having been to a friend's birthday party the previous night. He had, unusually for him, nothing to say except that he was looking forward to going back to bed after seeing us off. At the airport, there was quite a bit of checking as we were destined for Tibet. Our bags were checked twice, our visa meant that we had to stay together at all costs; everyone who is not Han Chinese was under suspicion, as potential subversives and possible encouragers of political unrest. In fact it took so long to check us and our baggage the plane was late taking off.



During the flight we sat next to Buddhist pilgrims who were twirling prayer wheels throughout the flight and using prayer beads. Opposite them were some Buddhist monks who seemed to have a more relaxed attitude to their prayer wheels and beads, which did make a brief appearance when they were not overcome by sleep. China Air certainly ensured that we were looked after well on each of the three flights that we took with them, always warning us of the slightest hint of turbulence and stopping films midway through and switching off lights when they deemed that we should rest or sleep!

*Subsequent articles will cover Tibet, Nepal and India.*