

# ADRIFT IN CHINA





**ADRIFT IN CHINA**

**SIMON MYERS**

summersdale *travel*

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Simon Myers



SUMMERSDALE

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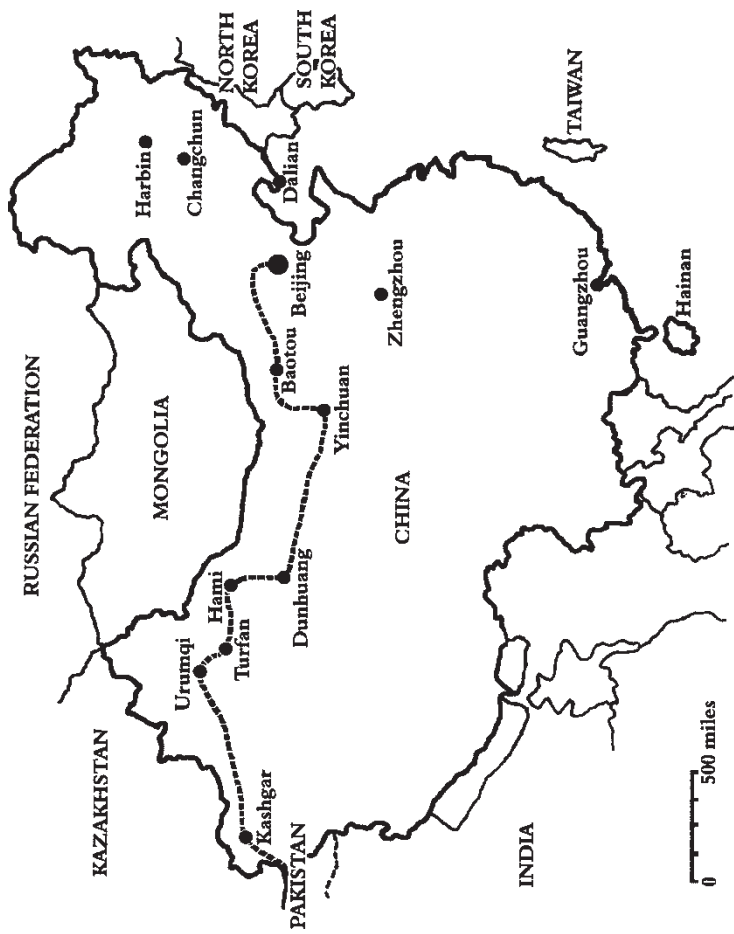
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For Céline (and the bikers)





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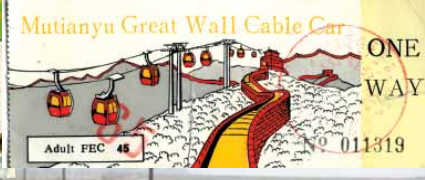
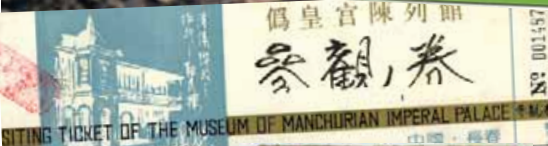
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## Introduction

*There is the kingdom of China, which they say is a very extensive dominion, both along the coast of the sea, and in the interior.*

– Duarte Barbosa, AD 1518

To have an introduction these days seems somehow old-fashioned. Yet with a subject as colossal as China, a pause or brief reflection before entering such a limitless labyrinth can be a positive thing. China is the third largest country in the world, holds nearly a quarter of the earth's population and claims a recorded history going back more than 3,000 years. Foreigners' reactions to China and its people veer from one extreme to the other; the gargantuan size of the place demands a sweeping response. This is understandable. Time is needed for such a big and complex country, something most travellers today lack.

This book is about a journey in China. One that started in 1990 and finished eight years later in a daze on a Changjian motorbike and sidecar in London. I didn't think it would take that long – honest. If I had thought it would, I doubt I would have started. What began as an innocent year abroad to learn another language slipped unnoticed, like a tributary of the Yellow River, inevitable and lazy, into something bigger and more demanding.

This book is about time spent studying, working and travelling in the Middle Kingdom during a decade when

much changed in China, and yet much stayed the same. It is an account that seeks to acknowledge and celebrate the country's particular disorientating appeal for the foreigner. For those readers yet to experience China, it may even provide some much needed guidance. In such an extraordinary country it is easy to get lost.

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PART ONE

中華人民共和國



外國人就業証

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## Prologue

*People travel to escape the predators of the world, to find out what lies over the garden wall, or even to sell Coca-Cola to the Chinese.*

– Eric Newby

### **Zhengzhou, Henan Province, 1998**

I woke up sweating and feeling uncomfortable. My heart was beating at an alarming speed, breathing was difficult and my mouth was as dry as the desert. I lurched out of bed, across the small hotel room, to the bathroom. I hit my knee on the leg of the executive desk. Splashing water on my face to try to ward off a growing nausea, I looked around for the free bottles of mineral water that were fitfully placed in the rooms. *Mei you*. Nothing. I thought about drinking the tap water, but checked myself; I might have been technically drunk, but this was still one of the most polluted cities in the world. In the mirror I saw that I was still wearing my suit from the night before, and looking down I realised that my trousers were a darker and damper grey below the knees. Interesting. I stared at them until some explanation worked its way into my consciousness. Oh yes, I remembered now; the tasteful rock-pool in the middle of the lobby. Last night, I must have walked through it rather than around.

Weaving back into the bedroom, I opened the unplugged mini-fridge and found a warm Coca-Cola. With nothing else to slake my thirst, I drank Atlanta's number one product in a

long series of gulps. A brief belch and with it the strong odour of last night's Red Dragon Wine. The pungent taste of alcohol made me feel faint. Putting the can down, I shuffled to the window and pulled back the thin net curtains. Another day of hazy greyness. A dried-up concrete canal full of refuse ran behind the hotel while several bulbous pipelines careered alongside. On the far side of the canal there were dusty, dilapidated brick houses, small workshops, and beyond them, large factory-like structures. Visibility was limited and smog enveloped the city. It was probably better that way as the grey haze hid the scale of the corrosive conurbation that is Zhengzhou. A city of over ten million in the heart of China. Even after nearly a year to acclimatise, it was still a depressing sight.

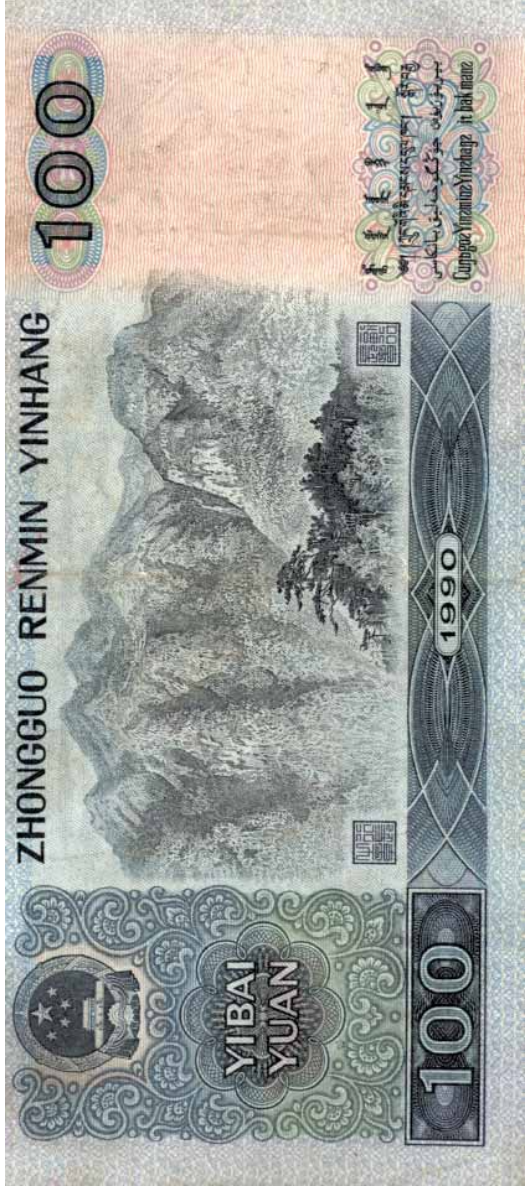
I gazed out while moving my tongue around a mouth made furry by the warm Coke. Just as I had suspected, the fizzy drink had provided only temporary satisfaction. It wasn't enough that I was selling the stuff; now I was drinking it before breakfast. Jesus. A headache that had earlier only threatened mild irritation was now in full progress, kicking at the back of my eyes. I stumbled into the shower. The lukewarm water had little rejuvenating effect and I felt listless and ill. How many mornings had I woken up in such a state? What was the acceptable alcoholic intake of the lone foreigner in China? At what point was one's health in danger? Whatever it was, I was convinced that the heavy drinking sessions were becoming life-threatening. I leant back on the damp tiles of the bathroom wall and let the water dribble over my head. This had to stop. It was time to leave the centre of the world.

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## Chapter One

### City of Eternal Spring

*Once you are in China, you will face not only the challenge of another educational system, but also a series of unstable emotional experiences owing to the new cultural environment.*

*– Study in China: A Guide for Foreign Students*

I first came to China, like many others, as a foreign student. Right from the start there was confusion and misunderstanding. Our little group of six, bound for the northern city of Changchun, had been picked up from Beijing airport in a small minivan with blacked-out windows. Against the backdrop of airport, people and car commotion, we handed over stuffed rucksacks whilst staring at the offending vehicle. Hmmm . . . deliberately darkened windows, definitely something sinister here. As the first foreign students back in China one year after the bloody scenes of the 1989 Tiananmen massacre, there was a certain suspicion of anyone who represented authority. Visa officials, passport control and customs officers obviously were suspect. Now this distrust encompassed the university minibus driver and the enthusiastic pedagogue student sent to look after us. Why were the windows blacked out? Was it for security reasons? Were we already seen as a threat to stability? Why did the keen student-type have a fixed grin? Were we to be bundled out the other end into . . . something unpleasant? Despite

having received a number of Mandarin lessons, our collective knowledge ran to a few set phrases: 'Hello/I'm from England/ These dumplings are delicious.' We would have found it difficult to put together a question that could have elicited a simple explanation.

Sensing our discomfort and furtive glances, the clean-cut Beijing student in the front seat turned around and pointed at the evil-looking windows.

'It is very hot outside. The dark windows keep inside cool,' he said in English.

Right. So that was it. Embarrassed smiles and nods, but one fellow-student remained sceptical, convinced there was a hidden agenda.

'They don't want anyone to see us,' she said, nodding her head in a knowing way.

This paranoia, a sense of something sinister lurking just below the surface, was a common condition amongst new arrivals in China. Apart from being in an introverted Communist state whose ruling octogenarians had just shown the world their bloody determination to hold on to power, we had drunk in the stories of older returning students. Reared on tales of bugged telephones, post being opened, read and then cunningly resealed, and all sorts of fabulous permits needed for the smallest journey, it was perhaps understandable that the mundane and the normal took on a wild significance.

We had visions of a ruthless police state intent on keeping young foreigners with crazy ideas like democracy and speaking their minds under wraps. Our very destination, not the usual exchange university in the heart of Beijing, but an out-of-the-way provincial college, seemed to confirm that

the regime was somehow wary of our presence. We needed to be corralled and contained lest we contaminated the rest of the population. It would take several months before this distorted view of our own importance to the Chinese authorities and the Communist hierarchy would be punctured. That is not to say that the government of China has no totalitarian tendencies, it has; but as a foreign student one is not a primary target. One of the contributing factors to a new sense of proportion was the discovery, later in the year, that our British university had sent us out of the capital not because, as we had believed, former students had overenthusiastically participated in the Tiananmen demonstrations, but to save money.

We were on our way to Changchun, over 15 hours by train north-east of Beijing, in Manchuria. A city of nearly three million, with wide tree-lined boulevards and functional concrete housing, Changchun translates as ‘city of eternal spring’. This had given it a rather appealing air back in Britain. It conjured up images of avenues with peach trees in blossom, warm days spent lying in the municipal park, and cycling to class under clear blue skies. Possibly even laughing, head back, while we pedalled alongside our Chinese classmates. I was genuinely looking forward to my time there. There was an assumption that because you studied Chinese, you knew more about what you were doing with your life and where you were going than students who took more traditional courses. This was a myth. My decision to learn Chinese had shamelessly hinged around a year abroad somewhere distant and exotic. Somewhere that held the possibility of an adventure, somewhere completely different, somewhere big, somewhere *else*. China seemed to be a parallel universe where

everything was done differently and the established points of reference were no longer relevant. Dramatic confirmation of China as an attractively strange destination had come the summer before at a drinks party, in a garden overlooking the sea in Cornwall.

Amongst rhododendrons, camellias and the sound of several conversations, a handsome young man walked over with a tray of wine glasses. With a fixed smile he offered the drinks around as the whole tray shook with a low intensity. Glasses knocked against each other and white wine splashed over their rims. People pretended not to notice as they conversed. His arms were trembling and he spoke in short bursts. From the edge of the circle I heard that he had just come back from China. He had been amongst the millions of demonstrators that took to the streets of Beijing that summer. I stared fascinated at someone almost the same age as me who had returned so obviously affected by his experience in a country psychologically and geographically so far from home.

Changchun itself, however, was to be something of a disappointment. As the weather worsened the 'city of eternal spring' revealed itself as the city of eternal winter. Within weeks of our arrival the temperature plunged to below -28 °C and stayed there for over four months. This change of climate had been heralded by an invasion of cabbage from the countryside. Windowsills, pavements, concrete balconies, backyards and disused rooms were all commandeered by the green winter staple. For the local residents this was the signal needed to wrap up in layers of padded wool and cotton clothes, paste up the last of the insulation paper (old copies

of the *People's Daily*) and generally hunker down for the winter. Vast quantities of snow soon fell, which in the urban environment quickly turned to slush and then limb-threatening ice. Simple daily tasks that involved going outside became hugely difficult. Going to the post office, swollen with clothing, became a formidable logistic operation; getting on and off the bus, falling over on the ice, the snail-like progress of the traffic, the crush of bodies. Inside every enclosed space hung the smell of garlic and stale sweat. I wondered if the translation of 'Changchun' had been a mistake or whether it exhibited a cruelly ironic national sense of humour. It was not until after several months in the city that I picked up the poorly printed Chinese university literature that had been handed out to us in Britain before departure. There, in the appendix, was the number of days of each season every major city in China could expect. Under 'summer' Changchun was bottom with 35 days; in case there was any doubt about it, under 'winter' Changchun was top with 210.

Not only was Changchun freezing, it was also drab, conservative and stubbornly Communist. Poorly constructed breeze-block flats lined the city roads. These were interspersed with heavy Russian-inspired buildings, porticoed and peeling, housing various government departments. A layer of soot covered the buildings, courtyards and people. Exacerbated by the wintry weather, the city exhibited a threadbare stiffness. While the rest of China was beginning to shake off its Communist past and emerge from decades of enforced boredom, Changchun remained staunchly dull. Perhaps the city, by its conformity, was trying to make up for its renegade past which saw the last emperor, Pu Yi, set up a

puppet government in the city with Japanese support in 1931. Nominally the ruler of north-eastern China, or 'Emperor of Manchukuo' as the Japanese called him, Pu Yi's authority in reality ran to the end of his drive. Until the end of the Second World War he rattled around his enormous palace, venting his political and personal impotence on his wives and imperial entourage. His unwitting collusion with the 'Japanese aggressors' and his unspoken homosexuality have ensured he will remain a marginal figure in the country's collective conscience. The palace is now mostly part of a university, while some areas of it are open to the public as a reminder of China's rotten imperial past. Despite the mandatory disapproving rhetoric of the explanatory signs, a visit conjures up a strange empathy with this melancholic and lost figure from Chinese history.

There were other points of interest in Changchun. A large park, an army barracks, an enormous car plant (which had just formed a joint venture with Audi) and the national 'Liberation' (*Jiefang*) truck factory. These lumbering eight-wheeler lorries are the modern pack-horses of the Chinese economy and can be seen the length and breadth of China. They come in two colours – pastel 'hospital' green or electric 'worker' blue. The noise they make is unlike more modern designs where the engine is the primary source of sound. Instead, the whole of a Liberation rattles, shudders and shakes. There is a creaking din that is hard to pinpoint. It is as if the workers in the Changchun plant have partially unscrewed all the nuts and bolts at the end of the production line as part of some mechanical practical joke. At high speed or with a heavy load one waited for the Liberation lorry to implode.

There is also a vast film studio in Changchun belonging to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) where propaganda films were churned out about Chinese heroics against the Japanese in the Second World War. As pale-faced Europeans, we were invited to be extras in a film about the Japanese attack on Shanghai in 1941. Playing effete foreign journalists held at gunpoint by khaki-clad bayonet-toting Japanese, we shrieked in mock horror as we were rounded up and gently pushed around. The soldiers were PLA personnel dressed up in Japanese uniforms, which must have been a duty on a par with cleaning the latrines. When the director screamed 'Action!' we stared menacingly at each other across the shiny tip of a bayonet. The soldier opposite me seemed incredibly nervous, as if one split second of sub-standard concentration would see his bayonet nicking my neck, causing untold harm to Changchun's newly established relationship with the outside world.

The horror of the Japanese occupation and the doughty Chinese response is an ever-present theme in the north-east of China where the population suffered terribly at the hands of the Japanese army. This grim period saw starvation, random killings, rape and torture, the destruction of villages and complete helplessness in the face of a methodical and brutal Japanese war machine. Not far from Changchun one can visit an 'experimentation farm' where Japanese doctors carried out gruesome medical experiments on Chinese soldiers and civilians.

However, it wasn't just the PLA propaganda department who had a monopoly on creating anti-Japanese spectacles. Later in the year, at a university sports day, the athletic festivities started with a full-scale re-enactment by students

dressed as the PLA battling the beastly Jap invaders. This encounter came complete with smoke bombs, shouting, blanks and Oscar-winning death performances. After a lot of noise, the PLA troops swarmed across the running tracks and chased the Japanese soldiers out of the sports arena. The two Japanese exchange students standing next to me stared on in horror.

But Changchun had also suffered at the hands of other Chinese. The Communists had 'liberated' the city by first starving the nationalist-held town into submission. *White Snow, Red Blood*, written by a former PLA officer called Zheng Zhenglong, tells the story of how thousands died of starvation, while others were forced to eat leather and rats to survive. There were incidents of cannibalism. The book was banned just before our arrival.

Just down from a commemorative concrete plinth supporting a Soviet Tupolev bomber (Soviet forces helped liberate the city from the Japanese in 1945) was the university dormitory for foreign students. Situated on the corner of Stalin Street and Liberation Avenue, this 'foreign student hotel' was our home for a year. I shared a room with a bluff ex-fireman called Dave. Blond and beefy, if people asked where he came from he would say, 'Grimsby, town of a thousand delights.'

Back in the UK I remember thinking this was a great line. It played on the unspoken prejudices of fellow, mostly southern, students. It also hinted at the existence of a self-deprecating humour which I instinctively warmed to. In Changchun, however, it was simply confusing for the people we met. Despite Dave taking a large amount of time to translate the phrase into Mandarin, frozen grins remained



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