



中华人民共和国

PART ONE

1977

Photographs marked 'PF' were taken by Dr Paddy Flanagan.

1 - JOURNEY TO CHINA

The journey to China began at 5 a.m. on Wednesday, 4th May 1977, a moment before my father's alarm clock rang; during breakfast we were serenaded by the dawn chorus. Just before we set off at 6.15 in the car, my mother appeared and wished me a safe journey.

By the time we reached Dublin Airport, the sun was shining. I sat with my small suitcase and heavy green bag in the main arrivals area while dad went off to park the car. When he returned, we went upstairs to the departure area, where we met Mr O'Connor, Patricia and Catherine from Shamrock Travel, and some members of our group. I now learned that Mr O'Connor would be coming with us to Beijing, staying until the weekend, and returning to Dublin.

We boarded our flight just before 7 a.m. and took off shortly afterwards. I sat beside the young man who would be sharing a room with me, Christopher (not his real name). A wine dealer with a stentorian voice and a flamboyant manner, he had a ready sense of humour and was good fun.

Our first of our many stops was Heathrow Airport in the UK. We arrived at 8.50 and had to walk a long distance to Terminal 2, where we had to check in once again. We were met by a Scotsman who had spoken to us in Sachs Hotel in Dublin, and who was a representative of Pakistan International Airlines. He brought us to the area where we would have to wait for our next flight, which was to Rome. We boarded an Alitalia plane, which took off at 1 p.m.

The first part of the flight was rather bumpy and the pilot apologized for the 'uncomfortable journey'. Lunch was served and Christopher, who had just woken up after a nap, gave a running commentary on everything in a phoney Italian accent. A young Italian lady sitting beside us was fascinated to hear that we were off to China. (I wondered what she thought of my companion's Italian accent.) She told us that she had been there in 1973, and described the country as being '*bellissimo*'.

I snoozed for a while afterwards and awoke when we began to descend. From the window we could see the Vatican and the 'Wedding Cake' – the Vittorio Emanuele Monument. We touched down at 3.30, half an hour late. Because of this, we had to rush in order to catch our PIA flight to Karachi. To speed things up, our luggage was sent on directly and we were checked in

as a group. All we had to do was find our way to the departure gate, where other people were awaiting us. Our flight had originally been scheduled to leave at 3 p.m., but the departure time had been changed to 4 o'clock in order to accommodate us.

However, when we boarded the bus that was to take us to the aircraft, we discovered that we were missing one of our group: a young man by the name of John. Hence, while we settled down in the plane, a frantic search took place for our missing member. After half an hour, during which we listened to piped Pakistani music, a bus drew up and out ran John with our Shamrock Travel representative, Patricia. We greeted John with a round of applause. According to him, he had been some distance behind us when we made our way to the departure gate. He had seen us turn a corner quickly; when he hurried after us, he could not find where we had gone and had ended up wandering around aimlessly as nobody seemed to know anything about our flight.

At last the engines roared into life and we soared up into the heavens at 4.30 p.m. We were served a snack, and I was given a copy of *The Morning News*, a Pakistani newspaper. In it was an article about China and a drought that the country had experienced recently. It also mentioned the possibility of Deng Xiaoping coming back to power. (The current leader was Chairman Hua.)

Our plane was a little scruffy inside, but was reasonably comfortable. During the flight, we were informed that we would be stopping in Istanbul for a short while. It got dark quickly and we had to put our watches forward four hours.

As we neared Istanbul, we could see the lights of the city twinkling in the distance. We touched down at 11 p.m., got off the plane, boarded a bus, were taken to the airport building, and given fifteen minutes to wander around the duty-free shop, which by now was closed. Here I met Mr Brennan, a member of our group, who used to work for Aer Lingus, and who was travelling first class. He told me that he had remembered speaking to Professor Tao Kiang at one of the Irish-Chinese Cultural Society meetings.

At this point we were summoned back to our bus, which drove us to the plane. When we took off into the night sky, the lights of the city disappeared beneath us when we flew into a bank of cloud. Soon, however, we were above the clouds and gazing at the moon. When the roar of the engines subsided a little, we settled down to sleep while we sped through the night towards Karachi.

After a long and tedious flight, we finally arrived in Karachi at 4.15 a.m. The heat hit us like a furnace door being opened. We spent a long time waiting in the rather dirty airport; it looked the worse for wear, for the paint

on most of the walls was peeling. Here we saw good-looking men lolling around, older men in robes with long white beards, and wives with yashmaks, dressed in black. The airport was quite crowded, even at this hour of the morning, and fans whirred above us in a vain attempt to stir the hot, sticky air. Again, our passports were taken from us and we were checked through as a group.

Having collected our luggage, we made our way outside, where an old, rusty and battered bus awaited us. While our luggage was loaded into the back of the boneshaker, crowds of curious Pakistanis stopped to stare at us. Tiny birds screeched and flew around in circles nearby, attracted (no doubt) by some spotlights that illuminated a row of trees.

Eventually, everything and everybody was squeezed inside the bus. The engine roared into life and off we set into the night, blowing up a cloud of dust. As it was so hot, the windows had been left wide open. The views were revealing: we saw many poor people lying on the roadside, or on heaps of builders' rubble and sand, fast asleep. Others were ambling about or cycling on large old-fashioned black bicycles. The bus was driven at great speed, and the driver made frequent use of the horn. We passed by small villages, houses, mosques, and large advertisements in English.

We eventually arrived at a modern, smart hotel, the Intercontinental, at about 5.30 a.m. It was well designed and very clean inside. The service was efficient, and we were checked in quickly. Christopher and I had a room on the fourth floor; we went up in the lift and our luggage arrived shortly afterwards.

I eventually got into bed by about 6 a.m. Just as I was beginning to doze, I was rudely awoken by the sound of pop music coming from a loudspeaker somewhere in the room. Despite this, Christopher was fast asleep. I found the loudspeaker underneath the table between the beds, but I could not find the controls. Unwilling to disturb Christopher, I reluctantly left the dreadful music playing and returned to bed. The music came and went, starting just before the hour and continuing for about fifteen or twenty minutes. However, I did manage to sleep for a while.

As some of us had decided to go on an excursion around the city at eleven o'clock, I got up just before ten and went down for breakfast in the restaurant beside the entrance and near the swimming pool. A European breakfast had been ordered: two fried eggs, toast and tea.

I was ready at eleven o'clock, camera in hand. A well-built man dressed in a very colourful uniform and wearing a tall hat opened the main door for me and outside I found a minibus with some people in our group already in it. The driver was chatting to them; he spoke perfect English and fluent Urdu.

Later he told us that he had never been in school and, as a result, was illiterate. Nonetheless, he was very informative and interesting.

There was a considerable delay as Tom, another young man in our group, had not turned up. His room-mate John, who had got lost in the airport at Rome, went off to find him. He and Tom eventually arrived; Tom apologized and said that he had got stuck in the lift.

We now set off on our tour of the city. The driver shouted a running commentary at us from his front seat; however, because of the noise of the engine and the traffic outside, it was difficult to hear what he was saying. The streets were crowded, lively and colourful, and nobody seemed to be in any hurry. Driving through the city, we passed many fine buildings, including the home of Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and various mosques. I noticed many different styles of architecture: some ancient, some modern, and some a curious mixture of both. At one point we stopped to view a large area of reclaimed land near the sea. Building was in progress; we were told that housing was being constructed for the people. In the distance we could see a large, gaudy gambling hall, but our driver told us that as a ban on drink and gambling had recently been enforced, there was no use for this new facility for the time being.

After this we drove to some of the suburbs. We passed the mausoleum of Abdullah Shah Ghazi, an eighth-century Muslim mystic. This was a large blue building with a colourful dome, perched on top of a hill. Next came a market and some gardens by the sea, where we saw many Pakistanis relaxing and listening to music played over loudspeakers.

We then stopped to visit a large modern mosque that had been built in the shape of a huge dome. It was both unusual and elegant. We removed our shoes at the gateway and walked along a wide path with fountains in the centre and rows of elegant lamp posts on the sides. We ascended stone steps to enter the building.

The interior was vast, but devoid of any furniture or decoration. The walls were constructed of hand-cut onyx stones, of a type only found in North Pakistan. The ceiling, which followed the contour of the dome, was covered in honeycomb indentations. Over the entrance was a clock made of neon lights. When our guide stood under the centre of the dome, he gave a sharp cough. The sound reverberated for quite a considerable time. When he spoke, it seemed as though his voice came at us from all directions, amplified.

At the other end of the mosque, where one would find an altar in a church, was a small *mihrab* or niche, in which we found beautifully printed copies of the Koran. A small boy, sitting cross-legged nearby, was totally immersed in his copy of the Koran, which he had placed on a small wooden holder.

At the back of the mosque we peeped at the minarets through a fence constructed around some beautiful, lush gardens. Modern technology was used for the call to prayer five times a day: a tape recorder connected to loudspeakers. When our visit was over, we stepped out of the coolness of the building, replaced our shoes, and boarded our minibus.

Next we were taken to the large and magnificent mausoleum of the founder of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1876–1948). This had been constructed on a grand scale and looked like a mixture of a castle and a mosque. As it was placed on a high stone platform, we had to climb many steps to get to the top. All four walls had large entrances, and at every doorway stood a guard dressed in a gleaming white uniform. Inside there was a magnificent marble sarcophagus, surrounded by more guards. The marble was beautifully carved, and the silver railings around it were very ornate. Above, a huge chandelier swung gently in the breeze. As in the mosque we had visited, the walls were made of hand-cut green and sand-coloured onyx stones. We were told that the mausoleum had been built entirely by hand over a period of eleven years.

Afterwards, when we had put our shoes back on and given a tip to a young lad for no apparent reason, we left and drove off to see 'the biggest laundry in the world'. Here, in a large open space, we could see lines and lines of washing hanging out to dry, and people washing clothes in holes in the ground, which they had filled with water from hoses.

While we were looking at this, a very good-looking young Pakistani lad timidly approached me and addressed me in perfect English, spoken in a beautiful and clear accent. He was dressed in long white robes and looked as though he came from a good family. He was interested to know where I came from, how long I was staying in Karachi, and what places I had seen so far. He explained that he had started to learn English at college and was very eager to try out his linguistic achievements. He was fascinated to discover that I was off to China, and he hoped that I would have a good time there. Just as I was taking a photo of him, our driver called us back to the bus. I could see that the young man was disappointed to have such a short time to speak to me. When we shook hands, he held on to mine for a long time and said, 'I shall always remember you'. As we drove away, he waved until we were out of sight. I felt very moved by this brief encounter and regretted not having asked him for his name and address. One of my companions opined that our short conversation had probably made his day, and that he would tell his friends all about it. I had certainly taken to him, for his manners were so perfect and his friendliness so sincere.

On our way back to the city centre, the heavy traffic consisted of just about everything that moved: camels, goats, mules, horses, bicycles, motorbikes, colourful *tuk tuks* (auto rickshaws), battered-looking taxis, small

vans containing large quantities of people, buses, and lorries painted in psychedelic colours (no matter how old or rusty). Every vehicle was in every other vehicle's way and there was a constant din of horns blowing and bicycle bells ringing. Chaos reigned, it was hot and uncomfortable, but there was an intoxicating atmosphere of liveliness and excitement.

We finally arrived back at our luxurious hotel at 1.30 p.m., paid 90 rupees for the tour, and gave the driver a tip of 10 rupees (about £6 in total). I then joined Dr Paddy Flanagan, a pleasant man who was constantly taking photographs (both cine and still), Dave and Molly Tyndall, and a marvellous 77-year-old veteran runner named Frank Cahill. Together we went up in the lift to the top floor, where there was a restaurant with a fine panoramic view of the city. Here we had a magnificent buffet lunch. For a fixed price we could choose from a large range of dishes, including various vegetables, salads and meats. Everything was tasty except the meat, which was too spicy for most of us. We finished with fresh fruit and cream.

After the meal I rested in my room and later some of us went out for a walk. We quickly discovered that this venture was only for 'mad dogs and Englishmen'. The heat was unbearable and we discovered that we were in a very uninteresting part of the city. We just wandered up a couple of streets, where we were stopped by people either offering their services or just looking for money.

On returning to the hotel, we went into a large handcraft shop to have a look at what was for sale. Noticing some nice dolls that would do as presents, I decided to buy one. As the price was just 7 rupees (a little under 50p), I bought another to use up my money. I now had one rupee and few coins left. As I crossed the street in order to reach the hotel, a boy offered me some newspapers printed in English. 'How much?' I asked. 'One rupee.' I gave him the money and received three newspapers.

On the other side of the street was a parked car with a few suspicious-looking lads sitting in it. The one in the front passenger's seat got out and approached me.

'Hello there! Excuse me, sir...'

Paying no attention to him, I quickly walked into the grounds of the hotel and one of the colourfully-dressed porters opened the door for me. I entered the cool lobby, where I found Mr O'Connor sitting with his two representatives, Patricia and Catherine. I talked to them and gave them the newspapers.

Up in my room I had a shower and changed my clothes. As it was now time to leave, I put my luggage in order and checked everything. We all assembled in the lobby just before 5 o'clock and left shortly afterwards by the back door, carrying our luggage. The old coach, hot and smelly inside, was waiting outside for us.

We now set off for the airport at top speed through the busy streets. As I had chosen to sit in the front seat, I had a good view of the many brightly-painted vehicles. At the airport, our luggage was left in a hall, where it would go through the security check. An official asked for our passports and we were told to sit down. We sat under the electric fans, which did nothing to cool the stifling heat.

When at last we left the hall, we walked down a series of corridors, and at one point were stopped by officials who examined our hand luggage and searched us. After John had been searched, somebody ran up to him and handed him an item of clothing. It was his coat, which he had left in the hotel. We were then allowed to enter a large and luxurious waiting room, which had rows of comfortable chairs and a duty-free shop, in which I could see bagpipes and a sitar for sale.

As we waited for our flight, it began to get dark outside. By the time we boarded our PIA flight to Beijing at about 7.30 p.m., it was dusk. On board, a barely audible voice greeted us in English, and asked us to fasten our seat belts and not to smoke until we were airborne. One of the pretty hostesses demonstrated how to use the oxygen masks and the announcements were repeated in Urdu. Sweets were offered to us as we taxied down the runway, and at 7.40 p.m. we took off into the night sky.

Shortly afterwards we were served a most unappetising meal: curried chicken with curried rice and a bread roll, followed by a tasteless dessert that bore a vague resemblance to Farola. None of us were impressed.

Knowing that we would have to put our watches back several hours, most of us turned off our lights after we had eaten, and tried to get some sleep. I was tired by now, but sleep evaded me. I picked up a Chinese phrase book from a trolley of magazines and flicked through it. I was then joined by the lively Frank Cahill, who started to talk about his visits to different countries when he had gone to see all the Olympic Games. What he had to say was interesting, but I was tired and unable to take it all in. I was just aware of one thing: at last we were speeding on our way to Beijing – the ‘North Capital’ of the Middle Kingdom.