

5 – NANJING

The train rumbled, rattled and creaked as I lay on my bed, listening to the various sounds. It seemed that the Chinese people never went to bed. At every station the whistle of the train was blown, there were repeated announcements over the loudspeakers (sometimes two or three at the same time), bells were rung, people shouted and rushed around, and spirited military music was played from the loudspeakers when we left in order to continue our journey. All these sounds drifted through the open window.

We rose at about 6.30 a.m., dressed, and waited for an opportune time to visit the *cè suǒ* or washroom-cum-toilet. This was a little room containing two small circular wash-hand basins and mirrors, and a toilet that did not flush properly. Shortly afterwards we went to the restaurant car beside us for breakfast. It was painted white, had neat tables and chairs, pictures of scenic views on the walls, and green electric fans mounted on the ceiling. Apart from the smiling waiters, waitresses, and our guides, we saw no sign of Chinese passengers. We were served fried eggs, toast and coffee, and afterwards we returned to our carriage for a long day of travelling.



(PF)

I whiled away the time by chatting with the others, playing a descant recorder that I had brought with me, taking photos, and dozing, for I felt very tired having slept so little during the night. In the morning we had seen some mountains, but now the landscape was flat and endless, with fields stretching to the horizon. We saw little evidence of rice being grown here;

the main crops in this region appeared to be wheat and maize, which we saw being harvested with rather primitive equipment. We passed many small villages of rough-looking shacks with black tiled roofs, many of which were grouped around small lakes and surrounded by trees.

When we stopped at small country stations, the local people stared in through the windows at the strange-looking *wàiguó rén* with their big noses. Some of them waved cautiously at us; the children were more brave and less hesitant to wave and smile. Most people did not mind being photographed, though some turned away. The young children and babies were usually dressed more colourfully than their parents; red seemed to be a favourite colour for their clothes. In these provinces (Shandong and Jiangsu), the people looked relaxed and easy-going; we noticed that their work in the fields was being done methodically at a leisurely pace. We had seen them working at 6.30 this morning when we got out of bed, and we would still see them toiling in their fields some twelve hours later.

Our train also travelled at a leisurely pace; although there seemed to be no hurry whatsoever, it arrived at every station bang on time. This was an ideal journey for the veteran train spotter, for we passed many old steam trains, which were generally painted black and red; all of them were running and working. Paddy Flanagan was like a yo-yo, for he was jumping up and down taking photographs all the time, either with his cine or still camera.

The long journey gave Messrs Yao and Wei the opportunity to open up. Mr Yao certainly did, for he quickly got the hang of our Irish humour and was continuously laughing and trick-acting with us. Someone began to teach him a few phrases in Irish, and before long he was saying, '*Conas tá tú?*' ('How are you?'), '*Slán leat – slán libh!*' ('Goodbye – goodbye to you all!') and even '*Beannacht Dé libh!*' ('God bless you all!'). Mr Wei, on the other hand, although very pleasant and courteous, tended to be rather more serious. I took to both of them, but of course more to Mr Yao. He always referred to me as 'my young friend'; during our first day together he had felt the muscles (or rather the lack of them) in my arm and had said, 'You need to do more exercises'. He constantly urged me to speak more Chinese, and continually flattered me by saying, 'You speak Chinese better than I do, for you speak in the pure Beijing dialect. As I'm from the country, I have an accent and cannot speak it properly.' He certainly could speak excellent English.

As we had plenty of time to talk to our guides in the train, we often discussed various subjects, including religion – they would listen patiently but would have nothing to do with it. Another topic was the infamous Gang of Four – it was almost impossible to avoid this subject. Our guides always had an answer for everything, and always supplied it without any hesitation;

behind all the laughing and joking they were well informed and thoroughly versed in their Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong thought.

At midday we had an enjoyable lunch consisting of beef, chicken, 'red-cooked' chicken, rice, and vegetables; the meal finished with a soup containing edible fungus.

Our journey was pleasant, comfortable and enjoyable. From time to time, attendants came to change the thermos flasks of boiling water for our tea. We regretted, however, that we were not able to travel with the local people. Undoubtedly our guides had no intention of allowing us to do this, probably fearing that we would be shocked at the condition of the packed 'hard-class' carriages.

After we had crossed the new, long bridge spanning the wide Chang Jiang (Yangtze River), we arrived at Nanjing Station at 6 p.m. on the dot. By now the weather was cool, and it was rather murky and cloudy. We were met by another guide and interpreter, who looked for all the world like a priest in his black suit, and with his high collar, thick black-rimmed spectacles, and black hair. He was quite pleasant; he spoke English well with a slight accent, and after he had greeted us he led us to a coach that was waiting nearby. As we left the platform, I noticed men unloading our suitcases from the train and very carefully placing them on a truck.

When we set off in the coach, two iron gates were opened as we approached them, and we drove through the darkening streets of Nanjing to our hotel. *Nánjīng*, which in Chinese means 'South Capital', was founded some 2,400 years ago, and it served as the capital of various Chinese dynasties. It is known as one of the four great capitals of China. At first glance, it looked rather uninteresting. The roads were lined with trees that blocked out what little light was left in the sky. We did not see as many bicycles as we had seen in Beijing; many of the people we saw were walking. There were signs of poverty here, and we noticed some individuals dressed in rags. We saw young and old people straining as they pulled heavy cartloads of goods along the roads, or pedalled bicycles with huge piles of various things balanced precariously behind them. They all looked thoroughly exhausted. Our new local guide explained that the problems that existed here were not yet solved, and that it would take time to improve the standards and conditions.

By contrast, our hotel – simply called the Nanjing Hotel – was quite large and luxurious. It was situated off the main road, surrounded by gardens and trees. In front of the entrance was a huge painting of the long bridge that we had crossed in the train. We would discover that the Chinese were very proud of this new bridge. Inside the hotel, we were led to a reception room, where we were invited to sit down and drink glasses of jasmine tea. We were formally welcomed by our new guide, Mr Cui (pronounced 'Tsway'). He had

an unusual habit of repeating the last couple of words of a sentence, as if he were making sure that we had understood everything. He said to us, 'As you have had a long journey, you must be tired and want to rest – to rest. So maybe you would like to go to your rooms to have a wash – a wash, and take a rest – take a rest.' As we were all tired, this sounded like a very good idea. We looked at our watches: it was 6.30 p.m. Mr Cui continued, 'After you have washed and have had a rest, we'll have dinner at 6.45 – at 6.45. Then after dinner we shall set off at 7.45 – 7.45 – for a performance by the Little Red Guards...'

After we had made some sarcastic remarks about the brevity of the 'rest' and the extreme generosity of our guide, we went up to our rooms and got ourselves ready for dinner. Our room was on the second floor; there were no lifts here – just a pair of wide staircases covered in soft red carpet. Once again, our keys were available from a receptionist on our floor. As we were well away from the main road, it was blissfully quiet. The room was comfortable; it was very similar to the one we had had in Beijing, except that the dominant colour here was red. As in Beijing, there were laundry bags into which we could put clothes to be washed; for a very moderate price they would be washed and returned the following day. There were no shower curtains and therefore the bathroom tended to become rather wet after a shower. (Our bathroom in Beijing had had the same problem.)

Having quickly spruced myself up, I walked down to the large restaurant, which was at the back of the hotel and separated from it by pleasant gardens. I was bang on time, but nobody else from our group had arrived. I waited for some of them to appear before applying myself to an excellent meal, which had the welcome effect of restoring my appetite.

As I was not at all enthusiastic to see or listen to the Little Red Guards performing, I reluctantly joined my companions at the entrance to the hotel at 7.45 p.m. However, we had to wait a while for the driver of our bus, who was nowhere to be seen. At last we drove to a nearby hotel, where we were brought to a large hall full of Chinese guests. We quickly sat down, the curtains of the stage were pulled back and the show began.

A tiny girl, dressed in a yellow blouse and a pink skirt, emerged from the wings, took the microphone and, with great self-assurance, announced the first dance in a very dramatic manner. We were then treated to a riot of colour and movement as scores of beautifully-dressed boys and girls danced around the stage, with perfect choreography and timing. At first I thought that the music was recorded and played from loudspeakers, but when I took my eyes off the dancers, I saw a small orchestra of children playing a mixture of Chinese and Western instruments in the right wing of the stage. As I could not see the left wing from where I was sitting, I concluded that there must have been more musicians on that side too. They all played excellently,

seemingly without a conductor, and certainly without a note of music in front of them.

The small orchestra consisted of several *èrhú* (two-stringed fiddles), *jīnghú* (a smaller type of two-stringed fiddle), Chinese flutes, a *yángqín* ('foreign zither' – a form of Persian dulcimer imported into China), a *sānxián* (a three-stringed long-necked lute), two violins, a cello (played *pizzicato* most of the time), an accordion, and various percussion instruments that I could not see.



The Little Red Guards, Nanjing (PF)

The evening's entertainment was long and varied. The following item was quite breathtaking: a young boy playing a couple of very fast tunes on a type of Chinese flute that featured a vibrating membrane. Next, a sweet little girl played a *yángqín* in a very graceful manner. Although there was a strong revolutionary theme running through most of the pieces, these items were classical in style and therefore delightful to listen to.

A dance entitled 'Going to School' came next; this featured girls in yellow skirts twirling pink umbrellas. Following this was a song, sung by a girl with a fine voice, accompanied by a section of the orchestra. Next we heard a superb solo played very gracefully on the *èrhú* by a girl with excellent technique; we were astonished by the quality of sound produced by such a simple instrument, which only had a tiny snakeskin soundboard and no fingerboard. The performance included rather heavy vibrato at times, *glissandi* and an unusual technique that combined bowing and plucking. She was enthusiastically applauded, as was a young boy who played on the same instrument afterwards. He performed at great speed and with incredible dexterity. The first half ended with a choir singing a song in praise of Chairman Hua.

The second half began with an amusing dance that featured a certain amount of comic acting. 'We'll boil a meal for our dear ones' was Mr Yao's

translation of the title. This was about a mother cooking a meal; her little son and daughter were arguing as to who should carry the food. This was followed by a tiny girl dressed in red who, with great difficulty, carried a large and heavy accordion on to the stage, sat down and played three lively pieces, starting with 'I'm a Little Lorry Driver' and 'The Train Runs to Shaoshan' (where Chairman Mao was born). We were then treated to a colourful dance that celebrated the Great Victory (in 1949, when the Communists came into power, no doubt), which featured a lot of loud drumming and cymbal clashes. It was obvious that the revolutionary theme was being ramped up.

After this a tiny fellow aged about five or six performed on the *pípá*, then another little lad sang a song, accompanied by the orchestra. Following this came 'I Love Beijing's Tiananmen' and 'I See a Red Star' played by a little boy on the xylophone and accompanied by the orchestra. After a few more pieces for accordion, *pípá* and xylophone, the two-hour performance ended with an elaborate dance by the children, aged between five and thirteen, who very cleverly staged a representation of the new bridge being crossed by a train. As the whole show was so good and the children were so talented, we all applauded loudly. In traditional style, they applauded us and, when we rose to go, chanted, 'Zài jiàn, zài jiàn, zài jiàn!' ('Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye!')

Everybody in the group was enchanted by the evening's entertainment, and many had taken photographs. I certainly was glad that I had gone and was very impressed by the high standard of performance.

Back at the hotel, Donal (one of my companions) and I went out for a quick walk before going to bed. We chatted about Mr Yao, who Donal thought was a great and humorous character. (Mr Yao and Christopher had been getting on well together, though Christopher violently opposed just about everything that Yao said, just for fun. Yao told him that he'd have to take out his brains and wash them, but Christopher retorted that Yao would have to come to Ireland first, where Christopher would wash *his* brains. Yao stood up for the working man, and espoused equality and plainness of living, whereas Christopher was a gentleman of ease and an attention getter.)

It was very pleasant for Donal and me to walk down the road and observe the people who were out and about, and it was a joy to be free to do what we wanted for once. When we found a grocer's shop open, we walked in to have a look around, much to the amazement of the people inside. We then returned to the hotel and I got into bed at about 11.45 p.m.