

## 5 – LUSHAN

I woke up the following morning to discover that everything around me was damp: the bed, my pyjamas, and everything in the whole room, including the carpet. The windows in the bathroom were fogged up; when I wiped off some of the dampness, all I could see was mist outside. Despite the windows and doors being closed tight, the mist had permeated the whole building. I discovered that it had been raining all through the night.

By the time I had washed and dressed, Messrs Yao and Wei (who were also staying in the villa) were peeping around our door to see if we were up and about. At eight o'clock, when the rain had eased off a little, we made our way to the dining room for our usual breakfast of fried eggs, toast and tea, served by our charming hostesses.

An hour later we assembled outside the main building, armed with strong walking sticks and umbrellas supplied by our hosts. The old bus was waiting for us, along with a minibus. The latter, explained our new local guide, who wore a light blue loose-fitting suit and horn-rimmed spectacles, was for the 'elderly', as it was deemed to be more comfortable and respectable. Laughing and joking, most of us – including Frank Cahill – clambered into the old bus, and off we drove.

Our new guide proved to be quite a nice fellow. He told us that he had been learning English for just two years, on his own, and had improved his comprehension by listening to the BBC World Service and the Voice of America on the radio. (I was somewhat surprised that he was allowed to listen to these stations and that they had not been blocked.) Although he spoke English very well, he carried his modesty to unnecessary extremes, for he was continually apologizing for his poor command of the language. His turn of phrase was rather formal and unusual at times, and he would often say things that amused us, such as the 'backside' of things (which is a direct translation from the Chinese). He did not mind us correcting him if he made a mistake. Although he looked rather earnest, he was always ready to laugh at a joke. He told us that we were the first English-speaking group that he had met.

Little Miss Qing, who peered at us earnestly through her spectacles, was delightfully sweet and pleasant. She was suitably impressed by my rather hopeless attempts to speak Chinese; she solemnly declared to one of my companions that, as she spoke very bad English, she would have to improve

herself by 'following the example and great spirit of this young boy'. I laughed at this, for I certainly had not worked particularly hard at learning Chinese, and had little opportunity to use the language. Every time Miss Qing encountered a new English word, she took out a little notebook and wrote it down in red ink. Occasionally she made mistakes when interpreting, and often became flustered and apologetic. None of us minded in the slightest, and told her not to worry so much. However, she did worry, and one of us found her pacing up and down outside the villa in the early hours of the morning, reading an English book and practising the language.

I had little opportunity to speak to Miss Qing, for she kept with Miss Neylon and some of the older people most of the time. My impression was that she was rather shy and of a nervous disposition.

Our first stop was the Flower Path or Flowered Walk, beside the West Lake. This beauty spot had been visited by the Tang dynasty poet Bai Juyi, who had written a poem about it entitled 'Peach Blossoms'. According to the poem, the peach blossoms at the foot of the mountain had faded, but here, near the top, they had been in full bloom. As the place was quite beautiful in the mist, it must have been quite breathtaking in the sunshine. Here we saw unusually-shaped stones with Chinese characters carved on them, a little bit of blossom, miniature gnarled trees in square containers, and a hothouse where we saw many beautiful plants and flowers. We also managed to see the edge of West Lake where, we were told, carp could be caught.

At the end of the pathway we arrived at what was called the 'Fairy Cave' or the 'Cave of the Immortals'. Inside was a natural spring and characters carved on the rough stone walls. We were invited to sit on bamboo chairs and were served cups of 'Cloud and Mist tea' made from the spring water. The young ladies who served us were none other than the delightful Peach Blossom and her companions; Peach Blossom smiled at us warmly when we suddenly recognized her. We were told that the cave had been discovered some eight hundred years ago, and that the water from the spring was very good for the health and was reputed to cure stomach aches. Our guide gave us a demonstration of how high the surface tension of the water was. He filled a cup with water and continued pouring. The water rose to about a quarter of an inch over the brim and small light Chinese coins floated on top without sinking. Our coins would not float as they were too heavy. John's impish theory was that the water did not accept Western capitalist money!

After our tea and rest, we retraced our steps and turned to the left. We then walked through what seemed to be a mixture of garden and forest. We stopped to examine some characters carved on a stone. The characters, which were in the poet Bai Juyi's hand, meant 'Flowered Walk'. We also

stopped to look at what our guide described as an 'itching tree'. When the trunk was gently scratched, the branches and leaves waved.

At the end of the path we came to a small pavilion, which we were told overlooked the West Lake, though we could not see it because of the mist. Here a young man was sketching the surrounding mountains (which we also could not see). His pencil drawing was excellent and done in the classical style. Our guide spoke to him and told us that he would copy the sketch in ink at home.

We then returned to the bus and drove to a spot from where we might get a glimpse of the mighty Lake Poyang. When we arrived, we ascended some steps that led to two pavilions. As nothing could be seen because of the mist, most of us only went as far as the first pavilion. I soldiered on to the second one, higher up, where not a bit of the lake could be glimpsed. We were informed that Chairman Mao liked visiting this spot, and that he had been photographed here. Presumably he had been able to enjoy the view.

When we returned to the road, the lads and I discovered a bus-stop sign that had clearly been pierced by bullets. When we asked Mr Yao how the bullet holes had got there, he conveniently misunderstood the question and merely said, 'It's a bus stop'. We would have liked to have got to the bottom of this.

From here we were brought to the Royal Ming Pavilion, an elegant small building nearby. This housed a stone tablet with many fine characters carved on it: a monument to a Buddhist monk who had helped the first emperor of the Ming dynasty to rise to power. This emperor, Hong Wu, who was of humble origin, had at one time been forced to become a mendicant Buddhist monk because of his poverty. He reigned for thirty years, from 1368 to 1398.

Our guide shared our disappointment in the bad weather. However, I was enjoying the atmosphere of the place because of its interesting associations with China's distant past, and because it made such a welcome change from visiting endless schools, factories, and other institutions.

After we had a look around, we drove to the local town, where we did some shopping in the rain. We were greeted by a sea of black and bright yellow umbrellas belonging to the local people, who had gathered to stare and smile at us. Although the shops looked uninteresting from the outside, their rather quaint interiors were full of charm. Many of my companions bought souvenirs, such as tea sets and walking sticks. Parcels were made using coarse brown paper and twine made of straw. In a shop that sold posters and books, I bought two damp packets of postcards. I noticed that the prices on all the items for sale were printed on the covers or labels, along with other technical information, which meant that the price was set by the central authorities and was the same all over the country.

Afterwards, Comrade Yao and I went window shopping in the rain, examining the little shops that lined the one and only main street. When we looked in the windows, people inside stared out at us. We then went up a narrow side street and into a chemist's shop, where we found both Western medicines and Chinese herbal remedies. Some of the others joined us and asked about pills for rheumatism. When we returned to the bus, which was surrounded by the local people, Donal appeared with two large parcels wrapped in brown paper, which I knew contained two hideous orange Buddhist lions, made of pottery. Only now did he realize that he would have problems carrying these parcels around.

We were then driven back to our villas, where we had an excellent lunch in the dining room.

In the afternoon we visited a hall in which Chairman Mao had headed the 8th and 9th Plenary Sessions in 1959 and 1970. This rather uninteresting building, tucked into the mountainside, was surrounded by lovely scenery and faced what presumably was a spectacular view, which we could not see because of the mist. A stream, shaded by trees, flowed between rocks, and was spanned by a small stone bridge. In front of the building were groups of People's Liberation Army soldiers taking photographs of each other. No doubt they had made a pilgrimage to this 'sacred' spot.

Inside the building was a large hall full of comfortable bamboo chairs facing a stage. On the stage was a desk and chair, with a huge coloured portrait of Saint Mao behind. Our guides, speaking in hushed voices, invited us to sit down, and gave us a short briefing about the place.

Then, after another bumpy ride in the old bus, we stopped at a botanical garden in a picturesque spot on the side of a mountain. We firstly ambled into a hothouse and took a look at the plants, many of which looked like different species of cacti. Also included were miniature gnarled trees. From here we entered a pleasant building and sat on armchairs, sipped tea, and listened to a briefing about the place, which was built and developed in 1934.

After the briefing, some of us set off for a walk around the grounds, which were quite pleasant. Here we saw various types of flowers, plants and trees. The plants had their names on tags, in Chinese and Latin. Comrade Yao admitted to not being able to tell the difference between one flower and another, and claimed that they all looked the same. However, he could tell the difference between trains and aeroplanes, he told Christopher, and rattled off the names of several different types. We jokingly ticked him off for his ignorance of flowers. At one stage, he spotted the name 'azalea' on one of the tags. After that, any plant that we asked him to identify was an azalea – including rhododendrons!

While we strolled around, I chatted to Mr Wei. I was curious to find out what happened nowadays when somebody died. When he began to tell me about the ceremonies that were held when Chairman Mao died, I stopped him and asked him to tell me about ordinary people's deaths and funerals. As I had guessed, everything was very low key now. First of all there is a 'memorial meeting', which is a gathering of friends and relatives in order to mourn the passing away of the deceased person. The body is then cremated and the ashes are kept at home. If a period of mourning is to be observed, no specified period of time is enforced. In former times, deaths and burials were lavish and colourful affairs, with the coffin, possessions, and empty chair of the deceased being carried through the streets. Elaborate ceremonies were conducted to drive away evil spirits, and paper and cardboard representations of the dead person's possessions, which would be needed in the afterlife, were burned. Great importance was placed on the situation of the grave, and a geomancer had to be consulted regarding the selection of a suitable spot. Because of this, much of the land was filled with graves, many of which were removed after 1949 so that crops could be grown in the fields.

In addition to this, I learned from Mr Wei that marriages are a fairly straightforward affair; they take place in a registry office, and the families get together for a party afterwards.

After our stroll, we boarded the bus once again and drove to a dark and mysterious forest, where we saw the 'Three Valuable Trees' that had been planted by a monk some 1,500 years ago: two willow pines and a ginkgo tree. From here we drove to the local hydroelectric station. During the short journey, the sun began to penetrate the mist. When we arrived, the mist suddenly disappeared and the sun shone. The hydroelectric station was immediately forgotten as cameras were produced and we photographed the breathtaking mountain scenery. The trees and hillsides smiled in the sunshine, and the great waterfall that powered the station tumbled down a ravine. Moments after we had photographed the magnificent scene, the mist descended, and it vanished like a forgotten dream.

On our way back to the villas, we stopped again at the Flowered Walk, where the mist had cleared sufficiently for us to admire a stunning view of green mountains emerging from white puffy clouds. Out came the cameras again. When we continued our journey, we were able to enjoy some more of the surrounding scenery that had been hidden from view earlier: magnificent mountains separated by plunging gorges, luxurious valleys, trees, and lakes dotted with islands. Colourful pavilions had been built here and there.

Back at the villas, I took a few shots of the scenery using my ciné camera. I then joined my companions for our evening meal.



*Mountain scenery, Lushan*

After dinner, two 35 mm projectors and a screen were set up and we, along with some of the local people, were shown a film named 'The East is Red'. There were no prizes for guessing what this was all about: the creation of the People's Republic of China, now enacted in a spectacular song and dance performance. We had been hearing this piece of music constantly throughout our trip, in many different arrangements. The most stirring ones were sung by large choirs, accompanied by huge orchestras featuring rolling drums and clashing cymbals. Although this evening's 'entertainment' was suitably dramatic and vigorous, I soon began to lose interest. By now I felt as though I was catching a cold – caused, no doubt, by the dampness. In addition, one of the lads beside me was smoking a cigarette, which irritated my throat and made me cough. When the coughing got the better of me, I excused myself and left. The cool night air came to my relief. I wandered back to our villa to get a lozenge for my throat, but found the door locked. As I felt better outdoors, I hung around for a while.

On my way back, I came across one of the first dogs that I had seen in China: a strange white creature with a fox-like face that stared at me for a long time. I had noticed that there seemed to be very few dogs and cats in the country. So far I had seen no birds up here in the mountains. There was not a sound to be heard. In the silence, water dripped down from the trees and splashed on the stones. Lights along the stone paths that led to the various villas twinkled here and there. As I slowly made my way back to the dining hall, the brash music from the film gradually became audible.

Back indoors, I was told that one of the ladies had tablets for sore throats; I sat beside her and she gave me one. I then began to fall asleep, thus missing most of the film. As soon as it was over, I stumbled out of the hall, walked to our villa, got into bed, and fell fast asleep.

I woke the following morning to heavy rain, which came down in bucketfuls outside the bedroom window. Feeling rotten, as I had developed a throbbing headache, I stumbled over to the dining hall for breakfast. As the weather was so bad, our guides had decided that we would leave this morning. Although it was beautiful up here, we were all very glad as it would be a relief to escape the dampness. At 8.30 a.m. we waved goodbye to the delightful staff, and set off in the infamous bus, which bumped its way down the mountainside.

I was not the only one to feel off colour; some of the others were feeling unwell. Shivering, feeling faint, and with a pain in my stomach, I buried my head in my arms and dozed off. When I woke, we had come to the bottom of the mountains. Feeling better, I sat up and gazed at the fine scenery and the extensive farmland through which we were passing. Here everything was lush and green in colour; waterfalls tumbled down the edges of the surrounding mountains, which were enveloped in cloud, and terraced fields covered every inch of ground. Here and there, tiny paddy fields were tucked into corners alongside the road, between hillocks. The rain still poured down from the heavens, and the muddy water in the paddy fields spilled out over the narrow road. Nothing daunted, the locals were out working in their fields, wading in the water with their trousers rolled up to their knees. Some wore wide bamboo hats and short brown capes made of palm leaves; others wore large transparent plastic capes and hats. Here they toiled, with their water buffaloes and primitive equipment, or walked to and from their little shacks.

We stopped briefly at the Da Long Forest Plantation of the Yi Ku People's Commune. The entrance to this overlooked a breathtaking view of mountains and fields, which I filmed when I had descended from the bus. When I finished doing this, I turned around and discovered that a man from the commune was standing beside me, holding a yellow umbrella over my head. The man had obviously seen me from the door of the building into which my companions had gone and, not wishing to disturb me, had quietly walked over and sheltered me. The man then escorted me over to the plain brick building and together we walked up a wooden staircase to a reception room, where we sipped green tea and nibbled peanuts, both of which were grown in this commune. Fortunately we were spared a long introductory talk and allowed to rest. Patricia kindly gave me a couple of Panadol tablets, which made me feel a little better.

We then left this beautiful spot and drove on to Elegant Peak, which was not too far away. Again, we went into a building where we sat down at long tables and helped ourselves to more tea, peanuts, and delicious sesame seed cakes – all local products. While we drank and nibbled, we were told about the surrounding land and the local scenic spots, which were quite historic. We were told that one of the Tang dynasty emperors had come here to study.

Not too far from where we were was a view of some well-known elegant mountains: the Two Swords Peaks, the Crying Crane Peak, and Incense-Burner Peak, so called because of the shapes that they suggested. There were also two waterfalls and a Dragon Pool. Bai Juyi and Li Bai (both Tang dynasty poets of the eighth and ninth centuries A.D.) had mentioned Incense-Burner Peak in their poetry.

A few of my companions went out into the rain to see the Dragon Pool and one of the waterfalls. I stayed put, chatting to some of the others and a very pleasant but shy young man who tried speaking English to one of the ladies in our group. I immediately complimented him on his English, for his pronunciation was very good. We had a short conversation together, though he could not understand much of what I said to him. When we left, he sincerely wished me goodbye and shook hands with me.

When we were all together again – the others reported that the waterfall was quite spectacular – we climbed back into our rusty boneshaker and drove off through more fascinating scenery.

Perhaps inspired by the rain and the greenness of our surroundings, one of the ladies began to feel sentimental and started singing 'When Irish Eyes are Smiling'. Within a moment or two, everyone else joined in, much to the amusement of our guides. One song naturally led to another; the person with the loudest voice was my room mate Christopher, who sang with a pronounced wobble.

Somebody had told me that our local guide had somehow picked up the song 'Molly Malone' and knew it. We all sang it together, but he would not sing a Chinese song for us. Instead, Miss Qing obliged by singing 'The East is Red' (the only song that she seemed to know) in a lovely clear and sweet voice. I was determined to write down the melody sometime.

Soon after midday we arrived at Jiujiang and pulled up outside a hotel of the same name. We were brought upstairs to a suite of comfortable rooms, where we rested and drank some tea. After a while we were told that lunch was ready. We went downstairs to the dining room, where we were given a delicious lunch. Afterwards we went up to the rooms again and rested for half an hour. Here we chatted and joked. Miss Neylon told me and some of the others that Miss Qing had said to her, 'Who is that young boy (referring to me) who can speak Chinese so well?' Having praised me, she then went

on to say that she was not thinking of getting married! 'So,' said Miss Neylon, laughing at me, 'you needn't have any designs on her!'

At 2.30 we set off and stopped beside the picturesque lake that we had passed on our way to Lushan. When the bus came to a halt, hundreds of people gathered around to take a look at us. We crossed the long stone bridge that led to the island in the middle of the lake, and entered the fine Mist and Water Pavilion. It was quite a large stone structure containing several rooms and a couple of fine courtyards with circular entrances like the ones that we had seen in Suzhou. One of the rooms had been converted into a small museum, which contained some ancient artefacts.

This place had a delightfully peaceful atmosphere and the view across the calm waters of the lake was quite beautiful. Once we had seen everything, we walked back along the connecting bridge and were applauded by a crowd of blue-clad Chinese people, who smiled at us. Remembering the local custom, we applauded them. Back in the bus we waved at the people, who waved at us.

From here we drove to the railway station. We climbed out of the old bus for the last time, and thanked the driver and our local guide. When our train appeared to the sound of military music played over the loudspeakers, we boarded it and set off for Nanchang again.

During the course of the three-hour journey, I chatted to Patricia, Frank Cahill, and Paddy Flanagan. Patricia told us that this was the most unique and varied trip that she had ever been on, and that Shamrock Travel had ever organized. She considered it to be very successful so far, and said that the Chinese were quite anxious to have more Irish people visiting their country. She told us that our fares had been subsidized by Shamrock Travel, which meant that we were getting good value for our money. All the meals, tours and entertainments that we had had so far had been included in our fare, and (as we had discovered) tips were not accepted here. We could have spent nothing if we had wished. Mr O'Connor, the manager of Shamrock Travel, had paid for his, Patricia and Catherine's fares, and had paid the subsidies on our fares so that the price would look more attractive. The prices of following tours, Patricia told us, would of course be more expensive.

Losing something here seemed to be impossible. Once, when we had stopped in a train station recently and were about to leave the platform, one of the train attendants had pulled down a window, had shouted to us, and had handed a flat circular tin to one of my companions. It was an empty tin that had contained cough sweets. As the owner could find no waste paper basket on the train, she had left it on her table, hoping that an attendant would throw it away.

When we had arrived in Shanghai, Christopher had opened his suitcase and discovered that he had left a pair of socks in our room back in Suzhou. On the day when we were leaving Shanghai, Christopher was handed a parcel that had just arrived by post. When he opened it, he discovered that it contained his socks!

The local people appeared to be very honest about money. If any of us had accidentally left some small change on the counter in a shop, the attendants would run after us and return it. They could always be trusted to take the correct amount of money when paying for an item that required a complicated mixture of notes and coins.

Every time we left a hotel, members of the staff or our guides would quickly check the rooms that we had vacated, in order to make sure that we had not left anything behind. Often people's possessions were returned as we were about to leave. John had a bottle of rum that he did not want and wished to get rid of. He had, for this reason, purposely left it behind in hotel rooms several times. However, it was always returned to him. It was either he or somebody else who had deliberately left a 2p coin somewhere in order to see if somebody would find and return it. Sure enough, Mr Yao had discovered it, or somebody had given it to him, and he wanted to know who owned it.

Once again a crowd formed to have a look at us when we arrived in familiar Nanchang. This time we were driven from the train station to the local hotel in a comfortable coach. We were told that we would be staying here just for the night, and would leave on the following morning for Guangzhou (Canton). After a short delay, our room numbers were given to us, and we made our way upstairs to our rooms.

As we had not been given much time to get ourselves ready for dinner, I went into our bathroom to freshen myself up. The bath and wash-hand basin looked filthy, thanks to a dirty brown scum left by the water, and the shower did not work. I pushed the door shut and gave myself a wash, using water from the wash-hand basin tap. When I went to open the door again, the handle turned round and round but failed to engage with the catch. I suddenly realized that I was locked in. I shouted to Christopher, who seemed more concerned about going downstairs for his dinner.

He was only joking, for minutes later I heard voices. Mr Yao laughed and made jokes about me being locked in for the rest of the evening and having no dinner. I then heard Catherine's voice; she wanted to know if I was all right and assured me that help was on its way. I then heard more voices, this time speaking Chinese. The door handle was turned and rattled, but it still did not work.

A few minutes later I looked out the window and saw a few Chinese men on the ground outside, one of them carrying a tall ladder. He put it against

the wall, aiming it for the window next to mine, and began to climb up it. I opened my window and called to him. Looking surprised to see where I was, he climbed down, repositioned the ladder and made his way up to me. Being nervous of heights, I did not relish the thought of having to climb down the ladder. However, the man clambered through the window and smiled at me, a screwdriver in his hand. I could only smile back, for the scenario was quite amusing.

The 'mechanic' experimented with the lock and realized what the trouble was. Using the screwdriver as a lever, he pushed the catch of the lock back and the door swung open. Chinese ingenuity! Once again he smiled at me; I smiled back, thanked him, then quickly made my way down to the dining room, where I was greeted with a cheer and a round of applause! Fortunately my companions had not eaten everything and there was plenty for me.

When I returned to our room after a delicious meal, I discovered that the catch of the lock had been permanently wrenched back, so that the door could no longer be locked. I wondered how long it would be left like this.

In the evening my companions were brought off to a nearby memorial hall commemorating the August 1st uprising in 1927, where they were given a briefing about the event. Because of my cold, I did not go; anyhow, I was in no mood for more politics and propaganda.

I spent the evening giving myself a good wash with cold water from the tap (as no hot water was forthcoming), writing my diary, and experimenting with the radio set. This was one of the Panda models made in the Nanjing Radio Factory. It was a large, old fashioned wireless with a 'magic eye' to help with tuning in stations. As I trawled through the various wavebands in an effort to find English-language stations (I could find none), I heard girls laughing and talking outside my room. As we had not been given keys in this hotel, the door was opened and a gang of them walked in nonchalantly. When they discovered me, they did not look unduly surprised; they merely apologised and left.

I went to bed at eleven o'clock, soon after Christopher had returned. He told me that little Miss Qing had got into a terrible state when she had made several mistakes while endeavouring to translate for them. I could just imagine the worried expression on her little face, framed by her black hair and pigtails, with the old-fashioned schoolteacher spectacles on her nose.

On the following morning, I woke at about 6 a.m., in a bath of perspiration; because of my cold and the sudden change of temperature, I had been sweating all night. I had to wash all this off before breakfast, which was served at 7.15. We were glad to leave the hotel at 8 o'clock, as it left a

lot to be desired. Many of my companions had complained about the bathrooms.

After a slight delay we drove down the main street to the nearby Friendship Store. When we reached it, the driver blew the horn at the people to get them out of the way, drove on to a wide pavement where there was room to park, and stopped. The shop, which had been closed, was now immediately opened for us. The message was clear: Chinese people were not allowed to buy anything here. I wandered around inside and just bought a couple of pretty Chinese mugs with lids for just 1.60 ¥ each (about 48p).

While we were in the shop, a large crowd of people had gathered around our coach, and whenever my companions left the building and walked the short distance to the waiting vehicle, they received a resounding round of applause from their appreciative onlookers. Soon it was my turn. I felt a little apprehensive as I looked out the door at the sea of expectant faces. Pulling myself together, I stepped outside and walked as naturally as I could towards the coach. Immediately I heard the sound of applause erupting all round me, and faces stared and smiled at me. Feeling like a VIP, I returned their applause, smiled, waved, and shouted, 'Ní hǎo?' as I walked. I was greeted by a cheer and another round of applause when I clambered aboard the coach. Fame at last!

When everyone was aboard, we drove off slowly and waved to the people. They waved back and once again applauded us. As the bus turned, many ran around to get a better view. A couple of policemen kept order and made sure that nobody got in the way of the coach.

We now drove to the nearby People's Square and stopped at a large public building adorned with a huge colour portrait of Chairman Mao and the usual red banners and flags. To the left and right of the grand entrance were large statues of workers in exaggerated heroic poses. We now heard the sound of drums and cymbals; it turned out that a group of delegates from Beijing had arrived for an important conference, and were being paraded around the city. However, we were denied the dubious pleasure of seeing them, as they had just left the square.

Once we had duly admired the outside of this august building, we were taken inside to a large reception room. Four huge paintings dominated two of the facing walls; one picture depicted the French Revolution, the one beside it the Russian October Revolution, and the two opposite pictures were of 'Saint' Mao and his disciples from various regions of China, and the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949 at Tiananmen Square. Across another wall were portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin.

We were now invited to sit down in comfortable armchairs, and were served tea by a group of good-looking girls while listening to an introduction

to the building given by a young man. We were encouraged to visit the Revolutionary Exhibition of Jiangxi Province in three adjoining halls.

After the briefing, the girls led us to the halls and opened the doors. Inside were displays of rifles, photographs, tattered old books, documents, and assorted relics of the civil war before 1949. The exhibits were not particularly interesting and no explanation of them was available. We had to delay here for a while, for we had been informed that our flight to Guangzhou (Canton) was delayed. While we looked at the exhibits or relaxed in the armchairs with our mugs of tea, the girls chatted to Mr Yao. Like most of the young women here, they were not at all shy or bashful in the slightest.

Finally we boarded the coach and the hour-long journey to the local airport commenced. I dozed off and woke as we approached our destination, which bore very little resemblance to a conventional airport. We drove close to the runway, where we saw several small white aeroplanes. When we clambered out of the coach, we were greeted by a large group of sweet little girls, dressed in red and white clothing, who were waving large red paper flowers at us and smiling delightfully. They were here to cheer arriving or departing delegates.

We then entered a low building, where we sat down in grey armchairs in a waiting room and drank more tea. In a rack were some magazines; they were all damp to the touch. As we had some time to spare, I approached Miss Qing and asked her to sing 'The East is Red' for me. This she did several times, which enabled me to write out the music, note by note. I made several mistakes, as I was not used to doing this, and Miss Qing corrected me. She then gave me the words in Chinese and I wrote them down using the Pinyin spelling system, about which Miss Qing seemed to be rather vague.

After a while we were told that lunch was ready and we were led into another building nearby, which looked like a converted hangar. The meal was not bad, but it was not as good as what we had been given so far. Several of the dishes were a little too spicy for my liking.

Suddenly we were told that the aeroplane was ready. I quickly gobbled down some soup and hurried off with the others. We fetched our luggage, boarded the coach once again, and were driven down the main runway to the waiting aeroplane: a small Russian propeller-driven machine that we did not like the look of. We entered it from the rear and bade a hasty goodbye to Miss Qing and the other local guides.

Inside the little plane it was rather cramped, but comfortable enough. However, the heat was stifling.

When the motors were turned on, the din was terrific, and we had to shout at one another. Although I was not aware of it at the time, the motor

on the opposite side refused to start. Eventually, after three or four tries, which frightened some of the people on that side, the motor roared into life and the propeller whizzed around. We then began to taxi down the runway, the old plane bumping and shuddering as it did so.

The heat increased, and the volume of the motors did likewise. We then roared down the runway and, leaving Nanchang behind, soared up into the grey clouds on our way to Guangzhou.