

16 – THE JOURNEY HOME

As we soared up into the heavens, I looked down at the lights of Singapore twinkling far below. In the sky hung a half moon; it had fallen on its side, with the straight edge horizontal rather than vertical. Dramatic flashes of red sheet lightning lit up the night sky far away on the horizon – quite a spectacular sight. Now and then the sky was illuminated so brightly that it looked like daytime. After a while we changed direction and the lightning disappeared.

Shortly afterwards, the first of many meals sealed in plastic were served to us, which helped fill the time. I subsequently tried to read and then sleep, but was unsuccessful in both.

Our first stop, to pick up more passengers, was Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaya. After a short while here, we sped onwards for a few hours, then stopped at Colombo in Sri Lanka, where I pushed down the arms of the two empty seats beside me, fetched a pillow, and lay down. A few minutes later two young ladies asked if they could sit down beside me as they could find no free seats for themselves. I reluctantly sat up and made way for them.

Both were very pleasant and I chatted to them. The two girls, who came from Australia, were on their way to Egypt, where they had booked a three-week holiday. They hoped to obtain a work visa and stay in the country for about three months, working. Their first stop had been Bali, where they had been for about six weeks. They were surprised to discover that I knew about the gamelan orchestras. It must have been very hot both in Bali and Sri Lanka, for both were wearing summer clothes and were as brown as berries. They were fascinated to hear that I and the others had been in China. They told me about a friend of theirs who had gone to China for a three-week holiday about two years previously; he had liked it so much that five weeks after he returned home, he went back in order to study in a university there. He was still in China, studying.

My two pretty friends had voracious appetites, for when the next meal was served, they ate everything, including some bits and pieces that I did not want, and ordered glass after glass of orange juice, having refused tea.

After some more chat, the girls reclined their seats and dropped off to sleep. I wished that I could have done the same, but I could not because of the noise of the motors.

Our next stop was Karachi in Pakistan. We should have touched down here at 4.20 a.m. local time and left at 7 a.m., but as we had been delayed, we had less time to kill. Once again we stepped out into the sticky heat and walked to the large cool waiting room in the airport. I said goodbye to the Australian girls and wished them an enjoyable stay in Egypt. It was well for them!

We finally footed it back to the plane, which by now had refuelled, and were greeted by the same Pakistani music that we had heard every time we had landed. By now I more or less knew it by heart – especially a melody played on a flute and accompanied by drums known as *tabla*. Once again the engines roared into life, we taxied down the runway and took off into the pale morning sky.

As we travelled it became brighter and brighter. When we flew over the Arabian Sea, all that could be seen were sky, clouds, and the sea far below. After a while we found ourselves flying over the stark Arabian peninsula. At first we could see brown mountains; soon they disappeared and we flew over a vast expanse of sand, with occasional small patches of vegetation dotted here and there.

We then began to descend. We now began to discern long, straight roads crossing the empty desert, and some buildings here and there. An airport suddenly appeared in the wilderness and within a few moments we touched down. We had arrived in Dubai.

We stepped out into the fierce, dry heat and looked around. The desert was completely flat as far as the eye could see, and the only thing visible was the very modern airport building, made of dazzling white stone. Inside it was luxurious, very spacious, and spotlessly clean. We saw many handsome men: some in the traditional white robes and others, especially the younger men, in European suits. I walked around a huge hall several times in order to stretch my legs, and had a look at the duty-free shops, which were very modern in design. As in Singapore, the people were exceptionally good looking. There was a very prosperous feel about the whole place.

Shortly afterwards we had our hand luggage checked for security, and we handed back the 'in-transit' cards that we had been given earlier. When we returned to the plane, I stopped briefly to look out into the empty desert, felt thankful that I would not have to stay here, and climbed up the steps into the plane. Once again we were greeted with the same piped music, which included the familiar piece for flute and *tabla*.

Shortly afterwards, we roared down the runway and soared up into the deep blue cloudless sky. As we rose, we swung out over the equally deep blue Persian Gulf, then turned north-westwards over Saudi Arabia towards Syria, passing over either Iraq or Jordan. The landscape beneath us consisted either of sand or parched brown mountains. Soon we were

crossing Turkey and, later on, Ankara the capital. Here we began to see snow on the mountain tops and more vegetation. Clouds now began to appear.

At this point, Mrs Jones sat beside me for a while and we chatted. Some of the others, for want of something to do, began to try out pocket-sized portable tape recorders that they had bought in Hong Kong. Frank Cahill was rather mystified as to how his one worked, and so I showed him how to operate it.

Soon afterwards we flew over Istanbul and then crossed Europe towards Amsterdam. More cloud appeared and we could see less and less from the windows. I whiled away the time by reading, dozing, and chatting to some of the others. This stretch of the journey was the longest and most boring, for it took us over seven hours to fly from Dubai to Amsterdam.

It was a joy to peer out of the window at the flat green fields of the Netherlands. On our approach to the capital, we wheeled around over the North Sea, then descended towards Schiphol airport. What a pleasure it was to be able to stand up once again! Inside the airport, Frank Cahill and I walked quickly up and down the waiting room in order to stretch our legs – no doubt the other passengers thought that we were quite crazy!

Back on the plane, we flew across the North Sea towards London. En route we were served yet another snack wrapped in plastic. By now we were thoroughly fed up with aeroplane food! Mercifully, the flight was short, and soon we were descending towards Heathrow Airport.

In the airport, I feasted my eyes on a ravishing-looking young Arabian lady who had joined us in Dubai: her exquisite face was framed by long, straight black hair. It felt strange being among European people once again. After the relative dullness and oppressiveness of communist China, the vulgarity of commercialized modern European culture came as a shock. I now felt quite out of place in what had previously been a familiar environment.

We were taken by bus to another terminal, where we had to guard our luggage and check it in ourselves; for security reasons, the airport staff would not do this for us. We had to fetch trolleys, put our luggage on them, and make our way to a large waiting area. As we had been warned about pickpockets and thieves, we had to keep a constant watch over our luggage. Having asked some of our companions to mind ours, Paddy Flanagan and I went off to post our ciné films to the processing laboratory.

Shortly afterwards, we made our way to the departure gate, pushing our trolleys down a long corridor. Suddenly there was a commotion as Catherine and Frank Cahill came running along. Somebody else was pushing Frank's luggage on a trolley. Moments later Frank came running back in the opposite direction, with his luggage. It transpired that his sister, who he had tried to telephone, had left a message inviting him to call and stay with her

in Manchester, and now he was heading off for another departure gate. We were all amazed at the old man's energy; he had never been ill once during the entire holiday.

At the departure gate we had to go through another security check. The man who examined my luggage was amused by my Chinese musical instruments. When we finally sat down to wait, I suddenly felt absolutely exhausted. My eyes felt as though they had been sandpapered; although I was physically awake and fit, I felt that I was ready to fall asleep.

Soon afterwards we boarded our BEA flight, which would take us to Dublin – the last stage of our journey. Although it was warm and sunny outside, it felt very cold after Karachi and Dubai. The plane was packed inside, and conditions were very cramped. My musical instruments would not fit in the hand luggage storage areas, and so I had to push them under my legs. We finally took off at 6.15 p.m.

As the sky was quite cloudless, we could see much of England as we flew over it. When we approached Dublin, we had an excellent view of Dublin Bay and the surrounding countryside. What a difference between this lush scenery and the dry wastes of Dubai! Despite the wonderful and exotic sights that we had seen during our three-week holiday, Dublin still looked just as calm and beautiful as ever – and very welcome. It was good to be home again.

POSTSCRIPT

Once I had recovered from the trip and returned to normal life, I quickly set about expanding and typing the scribbled notes in my diary, and drew the maps and diagrams that I have included in this account. When I eventually finished the typing, one of my travel companions kindly photocopied the 218-page document and made several copies of it, which I had bound. I gave presents of some of these to my companions, lent one copy for a limited period of time to various friends, and kept the original for myself.

Although I was complimented on what I had done, I cringe now when I read it, for it is full of typographical errors and very naive personal views on the political system in China at the time, which clearly I did not fully understand. Nevertheless, I have based this present account on what I wrote in 1977, with the mistakes corrected and the embarrassing sections removed.

Later in the year, Shamrock Travel organized another trip to China. Mrs Sun, who had been our guide in Beijing, stayed with the group for the entire duration of the tour, and had burst into tears on saying goodbye to them when they left in the train for Hong Kong. Like everyone else in China, she had no passport or means of seeing the rest of the world – at that time only government officials owned passports.

I continued to study the Chinese language, and read as many books about the country and its culture as I could find. I made frequent visits to the Chester Beatty Library, and attended lectures organized by the Irish Chinese Cultural Society. I carefully edited my 8 mm ciné film and inserted maps and graphics shot at home, and wrote an explanatory commentary which I read to friends when I showed them the film.

Eventually news of this film reached the Irish Chinese Cultural Society, and I was invited to give a lecture, slide, and ciné film show to its members in Carroll's Theatre, Dublin, on 6 January 1978. The hall soon filled while I was setting up my equipment that evening. One of the guests was the wife of the President of Ireland, Mrs Hillery; another was the eminent American foreign correspondent and writer on Chinese matters, Robert Elegant. As I had never given a public lecture before, I was glad of Mr Elegant's advice: find somebody in the audience who was reacting favourably to my remarks and deliver the lecture to that person alone. I was introduced by Professor Tao Kiang, who rather overdid his praise for me, and I started with the slide show, using original slides lent to me for the evening by Dr Paddy Flanagan.

During this section I spoke about our visits to the various schools, factories and institutions. Scanning the audience, I found a young American lady near the front who was obviously hanging on every word that I uttered, and delivered most of my remarks to her, which helped put me at my ease.

In the second half, I showed my silent ciné film with its live commentary, which was received with loud applause and praise from many people, including Mrs Hillery. However, Mr Elegant cautiously praised my lecture and added, 'I admire your naivety', which immediately brought me down to earth. It was obvious that he did not agree with many things that I had said. I explained that we had been on a conducted tour and that we had all been influenced in some way by the ever-present propaganda. I suggested that If he had not agreed with what had been said during a question-and-answer session that had followed the film, he should have spoken. He replied that he had not come to the lecture to do that. He asked me where I had heard that the Chinese work an eight-hour day, and said that the image that I had given of the 'Chinese and the "bottle"' was just not true. Finally, he said that he wished that the Chinese behaved in the way that I had described.

Troubled by this, I slowly began to alter my views about the country and its politics, though I never lost my interest in its fascinating culture. I decided that I would definitely have to go back in ten years' time and see what it was like then.