



中华人民共和国

PART TWO

1987

1 – BEIJING TO LHASA

At the beginning of May 1987 I received an invitation from Paddy Brennan to join a small delegation of people from the Irish Chinese Cultural Society on a guided tour of China, which would be similar to the one that we had been on in 1977. Although I would have preferred to find my own way around the country, I accepted the invitation. However, as this coincided with my plan to visit Tibet, I explored the possibility of entering Tibet from Nepal, and from there flying to Beijing, where I could join the members of the delegation. However, as I discovered that overland transport from Nepal to Tibet would not be possible in August, I had to settle on flying to Beijing earlier than my companions, travel to Tibet, then returning to meet them.

I arrived in the capital on 16 August in the evening and found myself in a large modern airport full of people in fashionable clothing – gone were the dull ‘Mao’ suits. The girls now looked stunning in colourful summer dresses and with many different types of hairstyles. (I later discovered that the small airport that we had landed in back in 1977 was now a military airport.)

Having exchanged dollars into Foreign Exchange Certificates (FECs), I enquired about getting myself to the city of Xi’an and bought a ticket for a flight that would leave on the following day. I then enquired about accommodation in Beijing for this evening, and when I was told about a suitable hotel, I set about finding transport to it.

Outside the airport I found a fleet of waiting taxis – proper ones rather than the official state-owned limos that I had seen ten years previously – and asked a driver to take me to the hotel. As he spoke little or no English, I had to communicate with him in Chinese. As we drove through the darkened streets, I noticed very little resemblance to the old Beijing that I had seen all those years ago. There were modern buildings and smart shops everywhere, and the roads were filled with modern private cars of all makes, colours, and sizes.

My journey to Tibet is described in Part Three of *In High Places*. However, for those who have not read this travelogue, the following is a shortened account of what happened.

The hotel in Beijing was located somewhere south of Tiananmen Square, and the journey cost me ¥55 (about ten Irish pounds). On arrival, I discovered that there were no beds available either for me or an Italian couple who had just arrived. A phone call was made for us and we were

whisked off in another taxi to the rather seedy Jinghua hotel, where we spent the night.

I returned to the airport the following morning. As it was too early to check in and as I was a little hungry, I decided to have a 'snack' in the restaurant. For just ¥1 (20 pence) I was able to enjoy a plastic carton containing boiled rice and tofu. For an extra 30 fen (less than 7p), I got a bowl of soup. If this was the price of a basic meal in an airport restaurant, it was obvious that the taxi drivers were making very good money out of us foreigners.

At last I boarded the plane and set off for Xi'an ('Western Peace'). In the past, this city had been a very cosmopolitan capital of China; at the time it had been known as Changan ('Long Peace'). We arrived in the extremely hot and dusty city during the afternoon, and I was invited to hitch a lift on a minibus into the city centre by the guide in charge of an Irish group of tourists. I left them at the Western Gate and, following instructions that I had been given, caught a bus to the very crowded train station, parts of which were under construction. After a good deal of searching, I eventually found the foreigners' ticket office, which I had to elbow my way into. A German couple helped me retain my place in what could only be described as a scrum, and a lively Australian girl, who suddenly appeared from nowhere, ticked off some Chinese men who were trying to get ahead of me. Surprised, they meekly stepped back. At last I reached the counter and enquired about a train to Xining; I was told that there would be one on the following day. Acting on the Australian girl's advice, I booked a 'hard' sleeper.

As I had asked Sally, the Australian girl, about cheap accommodation, she volunteered to take me to where she was staying (a hotel for Chinese people), and try to get me a bed there. We arrived at the uninspiring hotel a short while later. After protracted conversations with various members of staff, and using all her powers of persuasion, Sally finally managed to obtain a room for me. She was constantly reminded that the hotel was only for Chinese people, though the staff continually ignored the fact that she, a foreigner, was staying in the hotel. I was suitably impressed by Sally's fluency in Chinese. My room turned out to be a small dormitory with nobody else in it.

After a welcome wash in the communal shower, where other naked men stared at the *da bizi* ('big nose' as we Westerners are nicknamed), I rejoined Sally for an evening meal. We travelled on a bus to the city centre and stopped at a tiny shop that served spicy dumplings in soup. We were invited inside and given stools – the locals had to make do with sitting on the pavement. After we had shared a bowl of dumplings, we ambled across the road and found some fairly decent-looking food in a restaurant. Here we

dined on bowls of rice and a dish of meat and vegetables, finished with soup, and drank a bottle of beer, which we shared. Full, we returned to our cheerless hotel, said goodnight, and retired to our respective rooms.

With plenty of time to spare the following morning, I found my way to a local market in a narrow side street or *hutong*, where I bought something to drink and some apples for the journey ahead. In another *hutong* I peeped into houses and courtyards, observing people in their homes, and looked into shops and restaurants. I found quite a number of Muslims here; the men were bearded and wore white cloth caps. Many of the signs for shops and businesses in the area were written in a modified form of the Arabic script. Everything looked run down, dusty and dirty. However, the buildings here, although crude, had more character than the ugly 'modern' ones on the main road. In another *hutong* nearby I found a public toilet, where I squatted over a hole in the ground. After I had washed my hands, I went in search of something to eat. I finally decided on a large dumpling, made of pastry and filled with tasty vegetables, which I ate at the corner of the street. I then spied bunches of bananas for sale; I bought one and ate it on the spot. Somewhat refreshed, I footed it back to the dreadful hotel, where I collected my luggage and checked out.

Struggling once again with my heavy bag, I walked to the nearest bus stop and boarded a bus bound for the train station. As I arrived far too early, I found my way to a relatively quiet waiting room with soft seats, and relaxed. Later I went out to get something to drink and, back in the waiting room, I joined a tall Canadian fellow named Daniel, also bound for Lhasa, and had a meal with him. Like me, he was travelling to Xining to see the famous Kumbum Buddhist monastery, known by the Chinese as Taersi. Although we decided to stick together, we would not be in the same carriage on the train, as Daniel had opted for the more luxurious 'soft' class and had paid double the amount that I had paid.

While we were talking, a lady appeared and asked us to follow a couple of Chinese lads out to the train. I presented my ticket to a girl at the door and was given a little plastic label with 中 7 printed on it. This meant that I would be sleeping in the middle bunk bed of row 7. I soon found my spot and sat down to write my diary while the dark and scruffy carriage filled up. I was joined by a large number of Chinese people who hung their face-cloths and towels on a line by the windows. Among them was an extraordinary-looking girl with a very long face and strange protruding eyes. I later discovered that she was Japanese. She had been living here for one year, studying the language.

When the train finally left the station, the people began to relax and talk to one another. Everyone was very curious about me, for I was the only

Westerner in the carriage. All sorts of questions were fired at me, many of which I could not understand. When in difficulty, I consulted my phrase book. When I told the people that I was from *Aierlan*, I had to draw a map to explain where Ireland was. Most of them knew where *Yingguo* (England) was, but nobody had heard of *Aierlan* before. As the Japanese girl was also going to Xining, information and advice about our destination were kindly given to us. When an impromptu picnic started, I produced my mug and requested some *kai shui* (boiling water). Guessing what I probably really wanted, somebody filled it with tea and gave me a crumbly white biscuit. Later, a man poured some soft drink into his mug and gave it to me. At once I felt at ease among these friendly and well-meaning people, so anxious to make the Big Nose feel at home. A lady who was married to a very pleasant soldier had a darling little boy who was chatty, funny and extremely articulate for his tender years. A man, who talked to the Japanese girl and me quite a lot, had a lovely-looking daughter aged eighteen, although she looked only thirteen or fourteen.

Later I retired to my middle bunk and chatted to Kato, the Japanese girl, who had the middle bunk opposite me. We talked about Japan and she tried a few words of English. It was good to have people to communicate with, for the scenery outside was rather uninspiring. Occasionally we had music and announcements from the loudspeakers, which fortunately were not too annoying.

At about seven in the evening I asked Kato where the restaurant car was. She came with me and we sat down, joining Daniel and a French lad whom he had befriended. We ordered what was available: five different dishes, rice and soup. It was an excellent meal, and there was far too much food for us. We paid ¥11 – expensive by Chinese standards, but cheap by ours (£2.20). Back in our carriage, the Chinese people studied the bill and had a good laugh at it. They thought we were mad to have paid so much for our meal and, as far as I could make out, poor Kato got ticked off because of this perceived extravagance.

I then got into conversation with a Chinese fellow who spoke excellent English; his friends watched and listened, fascinated. From time to time he explained to them what we were talking about. Now that I had a willing and competent interpreter, I was able to understand questions that were put to me and answer accordingly.

After my new Chinese friend had wished me good night, I settled down to write my diary, but the lights were switched off at half past eleven. I climbed up to my bunk bed and, after a little tossing and turning, fell asleep.

A comfortless, jolting and swaying train is hardly the ideal place for a good night's sleep: shortly afterwards I was wide awake and I spent the rest

of the night in an uncomfortable, slumberless state. At six o'clock, when it was still dark, people began to stir in the carriage. I finally got up at eight, when it had become quite noisy; I washed and went to the restaurant car. As there was no sign of breakfast, I returned and spoke to Kato, who told me that breakfast was supposed to be served from seven. She accompanied me on my return to the restaurant car. I was told to sit down; I learned that the delay had been caused by the imminent arrival of a tourist group. Daniel arrived and joined me but, as he did not have a ticket (I bought one the previous evening), he decided to leave, having been ticked off by one of the waiters. The meal was most unusual: morsels of toast coated in cheese, fried eggs, a glass of sweet, hot but watery milk, a glass of coffee and a glass of Chinese tea. The tourists, German and French, were not at all impressed.

Breakfast over, I returned to the carriage and took some photographs of the mountainous scenery through the window. It was quite pleasant here: fields of wheat harvested by brightly-dressed locals, shady groves of poplars, and brown mud-brick dwellings that looked vaguely Tibetan. The Chinese people in the carriage showed great interest in my photographic gear and asked me how much it cost. I managed to work out an approximate figure in yuan.

At last the train came to a stop just before noon in Xining, a large dusty industrial town known by the Tibetans as Ziling. When I met up with Daniel, we were approached by a Chinese lad who spoke good English; he offered to buy us train tickets to Golmud and arrange transport to Lhasa by bus, all at normal Chinese prices (as against double the normal for foreigners). At first we thought that this was too good to be true, but when he produced a name card advertising himself as a tourist official, we decided to avail of his services. The train ticket, he explained, would cost ¥25 compared to the foreigners' ¥50 FEC, but he would make a little money for himself by asking us to pay in FEC rather than the ordinary currency, the *ren min bi* (RMB). He promised to buy the bus ticket shortly. He now directed us to a small restaurant, where he asked us to wait while he went off to buy our train tickets. He told us that we could leave luggage in the station, for we had decided to go to Kumbum monastery today, stay overnight there and return tomorrow evening in readiness for our journey the following day.

As the purchasing of the train tickets took a lot longer than expected, we decided to eat in the restaurant where the food was both excellent and cheap. Our Chinese friend appeared briefly during the afternoon to apologize for the long delay and to say that he was having great difficulty in procuring tickets. Before I had time to say anything, he disappeared. We whiled away the time sitting outside in order to escape the loud pop music being played in the restaurant. About half an hour later, our friend appeared again and offered more apologies. He suggested that we set off now for

Kumbum monastery; he would get us tickets in the meantime and have them for us by early evening on the following day.

Shouldering our heavy luggage, Daniel, the Chinese fellow and I caught a local bus to the central bus station. Our friend bought our tickets and wished us goodbye for the present, and we scrambled aboard a bus full of dark-skinned Tibetans dressed in blue cotton 'Mao' suits and caps.

Off we went bumping along the chaotic roads of Xining. It was a ghastly place: the city was large, filthy and architecturally depressing. However, we soon left and found ourselves passing fields, trees and mountains. The bus was hot and I began to doze, despite the warning that we had been given: don't fall asleep as the locals will steal your money and possessions. This turned out to be a typical manifestation of many Chinese people's distrust of minority ethnic people such as Tibetans.

The journey took a little over an hour. During the time the bus had been driving uphill, which meant that we are gaining altitude – an excellent preparation for our time in Tibet. We passed a lake with pavilions and pleasure boats and finally arrived in the main square of a dull, dusty town named Huangzhong. We walked towards Kumbum monastery along a main street lined with souvenir shops and stalls. I cursed the Chinese for building such a ghastly place on the doorstep of such an important monastery. After a certain amount of confusion, we managed to book a room for the night in the monastery.

We spent a very interesting evening and most of the following day seeing everything that was to be seen in and around the monastery, then travelled back to Xining, where we found no sign of the lad who was supposed to have bought our train tickets to Golmud. Daniel showed his business card to somebody who brought him to the tourist office where the young lad worked. After a great deal of confusion and discussion, we finally purchased tickets for our journey to Golmud (a god-forsaken place in the middle of Qinghai Province) by bus. However, the lad turned up at our hotel in the evening with 'hard sleeper' train tickets for the day after tomorrow, which we decided to accept, even though it meant a wasted day in horrible Xining.

On the morrow we spent a long, tedious day with nothing to do, then started our train journey to Golmud early the next morning. We finally reached Golmud on the following morning, and bought tickets for our long overnight journey to Lhasa in an old boneshaker of a bus.

We eventually arrived in Lhasa in the afternoon of the next day and found accommodation in a rough-and-ready Tibetan hotel. I was exhausted and felt the worse for wear with an oncoming cold; the pitch of my voice descended to the depths of a *basso profundo*. However, this did not stop me visiting all the worthwhile local monasteries and beauty spots.

I spent a very interesting and pleasant seven days in Lhasa, and from there flew to the city of Chengdu in Sichuan Province, China, on Thursday 3 September. I would have three days here before joining the delegation in Beijing.