



CONTENTS

PREFACE

INTRODUCTION

HONG KONG – Borrowed Place on Borrowed Time

24 December 1982

PEARL RIVER DELTA – Chinese Rice Bowl

25 December 1982

26 December 1982

27 December 1982

28 December 1982

29 December 1982

30 December 1982

4 January 1983

5 January 1983

GUILIN – Classical Landscape

6 January 1983

7 January 1983

8 January 1983

HANGZHOU AND SUZHOU – Above There is Heaven

9 January 1983

10 January 1983

SHANGHAI – Industrial and Commercial Heartland

12 January 1983

BEIJING – Come Ming Come Mao

14 January 1983

15 January 1983

16 January 1983

17 – 18 January 1983

19 January 1983

BICYCLES

PREFACE

THIS BOOK came close to being published some thirty-five years ago. I had written it on my return from a thrilling month-long bike ride in China undertaken in 1982-83. But the publisher developed cold feet at the eleventh hour, apparently because of the prohibitive cost in those days of reproducing colour photographs. I therefore had to be content with doing a few illustrated articles for magazines and newspapers and a TV programme for Channel 4. I put the manuscript away and tried – not altogether successfully, I admit – to forget about it. Recently I dug it out and re-read it. Modesty aside, I think that there is still a story worth telling, the more so perhaps because it has now gained an added historical perspective.

I had gone to China with the help and encouragement of a London-based charity called the Society for Anglo-Chinese Understanding (SACU). Under their auspices I joined a group of cyclists for a fortnight's riding around the Pearl River Delta. Rather than head home directly after that, I was keen if at all possible to see more of

the country and preferably as a solo cyclist rather than a member of an organized group. China at that time was just beginning to allow individual visitors into the country. SACU helped me to draw up an itinerary which had to be submitted for prior approval to the government in Beijing. If the application were successful, then according to SACU, I would become their first independent traveller. The application was successful.

Cycling in China as part of a group – or, as it subsequently transpired, as a member of a foreign sporting delegation – was going to serve as a useful introduction to the country. But the real challenge would be when I struck out on my own. The plan was to cover the long distances between destinations by public transport, carrying my folding bike in its bag. On my arrival at each authorized stop, where I was to remain for several days at a time, my presence would be recorded by an official of the Chinese International Tourist Service (CITS). If I declined the services of a local guide, which apparently I could choose to do, then I would be free as a bird to ride wherever I wished and to explore independently until moving on to the next destination.

Over the past three-and-half decades China and its people have, of course, changed profoundly. Rapid national development has propelled its economy into second place in world rankings. China now plays a role in global affairs commensurate with its enhanced

economic status. I am sure, although I haven't been back, that the China of today is almost unrecognizable from the country that I was privileged to witness at such close quarters in the early 1980s. To give just one example of particular significance to the cyclist: when I was there the private ownership of motorcars was unknown. And look at the traffic now!

Here then, resurrected and unaltered, is my attempt to convey in words and pictures the flavour of how ordinary life in China had appeared to one curious outsider before those momentous changes had begun to gather pace.

Falmouth, Cornwall 2018

Spring bulbs placed outside on a bamboo chair to catch the winter sunshine. Shanghai



INTRODUCTION

THE AMBIENT temperature, although not particularly low by Beijing standards, nevertheless froze the breath. The cold air I inhaled as I pedalled along Changan Avenue past the entrance to the Forbidden City produced a sharp pain – rather, I imagined, like being stabbed in the lung with an icicle.

Once safely inside my hotel room, however, I discovered that the central heating system was running amok, belching superheated air from which there appeared to be no escape. Being a modern hotel, it was naturally impossible to open the windows. Nor was it any use twisting a knob marked ‘Wind Speed’ because, as I later found out, the console above the bed had not been wired up.

I was tired after a long day in the saddle, but in these desiccating conditions, sleep was clearly out of the question. As the night dragged on, I succumbed to fretting about my photos. Arranged in close formation on the table, like a miniature terracotta army, stood twenty-three rolls of exposed film. On these were recorded the impressions I had formed of China and the Chinese during a month’s travelling about the country

by bicycle. I had cosseted the film, protecting it as best I might from the ravages of dust, water, impact and even X-ray. But I could do nothing about this infernal heat.

I must have dozed off momentarily, for I emerged from the most spectacular nightmare. I dreamt that the heat in the room had melted the emulsion coating on the film which began to boil and bubble with volcanic ferocity. A garish Kodachrome lava-flow oozed down the table leg and onto the floor. I staggered out of bed and, using a screwdriver from my toolkit, removed one of the aluminium windows. An icy Siberian blast swept in and met the countervailing hot-air stream at a point more or less directly above the bed. I crawled back under the cover and made the best of the tattered remnants of the night. That was to be my last sleep for nearly fifty hours.

Somewhat involuntarily, I was forced to follow a circuitous route back to London, taking in what seemed to be substantial chunks of the Far East, Central Asia and Europe. Before I was allowed to board each leg of that interminable flight home, zealous airport officials would want to X-ray the bag containing my film. In their different ways and in their different languages each tried to persuade me that the film would not suffer. In my sleep-deprived state, however, I became increasingly obsessive about the cumulative effect of X-ray on film. I therefore stood firm, exercising what I assumed to my right to ask for a hand search, while behind me the

queue would growl and mutter. Eventually, several days late, I arrived back in London to be re-united with my family. They drove me directly from the airport to a film laboratory where, with an immense sense of relief, I was at long last able to consign my precious cargo to the safekeeping of others.

And out of that consignment this book has emerged. The photographs included here were selected on the basis of three tests: each had to tell a story; be faithful to its subject; and be aesthetically satisfying. And none, incidentally – apart from a few self-portraits – was posed, set up or artificially contrived. The pictures owe as much to my mode of conveyance as to anything else, for a bike is the ideal way to keep in close touch with the environment and the people. It gives one complete freedom. Thus I found myself able to roam as widely as I pleased in the rural areas as well as the cities, covering greater or lesser distances, for the most part alone and unencumbered.

following page:

Early morning mist enhances the view from the bridge at Seven Star Crag in Guangdong Province. The unearthly beauty of the mountains and abundant water are accentuated by judiciously placed bridges, such as this one, pavilions and other architectural features.





杭州

Suzhou, city of canals, is twinned with Venice. A boatman guides his barge under the central arch of a stone bridge spanning the Grand Canal.

Suzhou.

HANGZHOU AND SUZHOU

‘Above there is Heaven’

9 January 1983

A POPULAR PROVERB says *‘Above there is Heaven, below there are Hangzhou and Suzhou.’*

Hangzhou was described by Marco Polo as the finest and most splendid city in all the world. Suzhou’s reputation rests partly, at least, on the exquisite beauty of its women and the harmonious sound of the local dialect. Indeed, they say also *‘An argument in Suzhou is more pleasant than praise in Guangzhou.’* These are good and sufficient reasons for my coming here.

My hotel is an older, rather grand building standing on the shore of the fabled West Lake. It has lofty ceilings, highly polished hardwood doors and windows, and floorboards that creak but in a friendly way. I stole out at 5:30 this morning to see the sunrise from Early Sun Terrace at the summit of a hill immediately behind the hotel. Finding my way in the darkness to the top of

the hill was not straightforward. What I took to be a path kept on petering out. At one point I came upon what had obviously been a military fortification with trenches, bunkers and gun emplacements. Although it was now overgrown with bramble, I hurried past as quickly as I could.

At the top of the hill, still in search of Early Sun Terrace, I found a ruined building which although not meriting such a poetic name, appeared to be the highest point in the vicinity. Some of its walls survived to a height of about fifteen feet. The building was constructed of roughly hewn red granite blocks and had an ancient feel to it. I settled down on the highest surviving wall, camera in hand, to await the sunrise. But it was not to be. As it gradually grew lighter, Hangzhou, the West Lake with its causeways and islands, and the encircling rim of mountains, all lay under a thick blanket of cloud. It looked ominous. Dispirited, cold and hungry, I slunk back to the hotel.

After breakfast I cycled right around West Lake and also saw something of the city. Then I rode across a causeway to Solitary Hill Island and climbed up towards a slender pagoda which, from afar, was reminiscent of an Egyptian obelisk. At the foot of this monument people were queuing to have their photographs taken. Hard by, another portrait photographer was also at work, but his chosen background was a larger than life-sized statue of someone I took to be Confucius. All his subjects were young men who took it in turns to clamber up a rockery behind the statue where they would balance themselves with one foot on a convenient outcrop of rock and the

other on poor Confucius' head. Then with arms akimbo or folded – these apparently being the only two permissible poses – they would stare fixedly into the lens and await the click of the shutter. They looked like big-game hunters posing with their kill.

By now it was getting even colder. I found a terrace on which stood a traditional teahouse with attractive upswept eaves. Two hardy souls were sitting at an outside table overlooking the lake, but everyone else had retreated indoors. Then the world seemed to go silent as the blizzard struck. It was a total whiteout. At this low point, a young man offered me sanctuary and invited me into the Seal Engravers' Guild where he worked. I responded immediately to his gracious gesture. Although the studio was unheated and unlit, it was a distinct improvement on the outdoors. Some young women, seal engravers perhaps, wearing fingerless gloves, hugged glass jars containing hot water in an attempt to warm themselves. They brought me a cup of very fine green tea which turned out to be the famous *Longjing* or Dragon's Well tea, a speciality of Hangzhou and universally regarded as the best in China.

Lingering Garden: the courtyard garden of one of Suzhou's most venerated houses built in the classical style during the Ming Dynasty by a retired civil servant and scholar. Its elegant aesthetics are highly regarded and it attracts local visitors even in the depths of winter.

Suzhou.

