

CHAPTER I

## *Barbarian roots*

*On his appointment to the position of Canton Commissioner in 1839, Lin Zexu declared that he would eradicate the opium trade: 'The barbarians all in all are a nuisance and it were better they returned to where they came from.' Unfortunately he never succeeded in getting rid of this particular variety of pest.*

*Rain or shine, the barbarians have continued coming to China, in search of adventure.*

*Within days of my arrival in the Middle Kingdom I got my first taste of some Sinofied Cartesian rules of thumb:*

*'The shortest path from A to B is almost never straight.'*

*'While travelling from A to B, most often B will not be stationary.'*

*'It doesn't matter how slow you go so long as you eventually reach B.'*

*Brussels, Monday June 5th, 1989, 8:37AM*

'The tanks are rolling over Tiananmen! The tanks are rolling over Tiananmen! The tanks are rolling over Tiananmen!' Zhang's voice grew louder with each repetition.

Standing in the doorway, I stared at him, still half-groggy from a long night renting out cars at the airport.

Zhang had a chili-red face and wild psychopathic gaze. He seemed like an apparition from a scary dream, and for a fraction of a second I seriously thought of slamming the door clean shut.

What was wrong with the guy? Zhang normally had a quiet, soft and sensible personality and would never raise his voice. But here he was completely out of himself.

‘What do you mean, “tanks rolling over Tiananmen”?’

Zhang pushed me back into my apartment. ‘It was on Voice of America! Let’s watch the news!’

More asleep than awake, I sheepishly shuffled behind him, wondering what all the fuss was about. Setting some water to boil for a cup of jasmine tea, he plunked onto the sofa and switched the TV on.

There it was, smack in our face: The major news channels – CNN, BBC World – were chewing it over twenty-four hours a day. Every snippet of video analysed, scrutinised, and evaluated over and over again. The other TV channels wasted no time in following suit, and primetime was full of discussion of events on the other side of the world.

I remembered the Chinese students had been having a ‘sit-in’ on Tiananmen, but to me it seemed they were having the time of their lives. China was opening up, after all, and many thought it was perfectly normal for the Chinese authorities to allow all of this to happen. It was part of the ritual of growing up, to go against the establishment.

So what? Every twenty-something held idealistic beliefs, and protesting was just a way to provide relief while having a bit of fun. From the reports on TV over the past weeks it all looked cool and innocent. It even had a touch of Woodstock but with Chinese characteristics, on a big square, in the middle of a city. There was *perestroika* in the USSR, so there should be space for more of the same in China. How naïve these thoughts were, in retrospect.

Zhang and I were zapped for a couple of hours, not really accepting as genuine the words and images beamed into the living room. We couldn’t take all the alarming reports coming from the journalists at face value. During the breaks Zhang tried on several occasions to call family members, but it seemed as if the rest of the world had already taken over the telephone trunk lines heading for the Middle Kingdom. That day he would not hear their hopeful, reassuring voices, or get fresh news from an independent source.

As the testimonies of reporters flowed out, Zhang couldn’t stop reading the slogans the students had written on their banners. He explained the politics, the leaders, their history and the factions within the Communist Party. He almost simplified it to ‘An Idiot’s Guide to

the Tiananmen Sit In'. I tried hard to take it all in, but much of it was not really comprehensible to me. While doing his best to enlighten me, Zhang jumped feverishly from channel to channel to catch the newest images. My friend sometimes stopped for several minutes on some international network where the anchor was speaking Italian, Spanish or German that neither of us could understand, but he didn't care any longer what language was coming over the waves. He simply soaked up every pixel displayed on the screen, and as time ticked by he became completely absorbed in his own world.

What was going through his mind, what was he thinking? He was suddenly so reserved. Even in these moments of horror he wouldn't show his inner feelings. From time to time he spoke in a detached manner about what he was witnessing, as if the pictures had had a sedating effect on him. But deep inside I knew his neurons were going berserk, and his thoughts were with his family, his friends, his country.

I tried on several occasions to kick-start a discussion of what we had seen, but it didn't go smoothly. Zhang was completely disconnected from his surroundings. Between sips of jasmine tea and an exchange of words I strove to grasp what it meant for China, and for his fellow students here in Europe. But I truly felt like an outsider, as if a shadowy Great Wall of China was separating our minds. We quietly sat there for a couple more hours, watching the same reports over and over again.

While staring at the tv, it also slowly dawned upon me that my dream of working in China was little by little turning into a 'no go'.

Two weeks earlier I had received the go ahead to teach Quantum Physics in a university in Xi'an and was actively preparing for my departure at the end of July. It was all I'd aspired to do since beginning my university studies six years earlier. I just wanted to go to China, work there, live in another culture, make friends, absorb their way of life and discover that part of the world. A couple of years earlier I'd been bitten by the China bug and slowly turned into a China freak, studying some Chinese, reading everything about the PRC that passed through my hands, attending receptions at the Chinese Embassy, even attending Chinese New Year celebrations in godforsaken parts of Antwerp to soak up the culture. . . . I was so looking forward to the

big unknown, and now it was all ending abruptly as I sat on the sofa watching the news.

Sure enough, a couple of days later a call came. It was from the organisation that had hired me for the teaching job: 'Sir, due to recent events we're temporarily calling a halt to all our Chinese projects. But we still have open positions in Thailand or Brazil. Would you be interested in working in any of those countries?'

'Does this mean China is completely off limits?' That was the only question I could stutter through the phone.

'Most probably we'll suspend our China programme for a year, or longer if necessary.'

I just stared, blank and disappointed in everything. Why was nothing going my way?

Zhang, in the meantime, joined up with the rest of the Chinese students residing in Belgium and protested on a daily basis in the streets of the capital. I attended a couple of times, but things got even more confusing when scuffles broke out with Taiwanese students also present during those marches. That Taiwanese students were denouncing the events in China was unacceptable to the Mainland students. I truly felt as though this wasn't my fight. I certainly couldn't get to the bottom of their arguments, and anyway the discussions were mostly conducted in high-velocity Chinese . . . far beyond what my limited textbook knowledge could handle.

Roughly a year earlier I had graduated with an engineering degree in Nuclear Physics and could easily have walked into a secure nine-to-five job, buy a house with a cat and garden and live a nightmare. This mould was definitely not made for me. The motto 'Born to be wild, forced to work' seemed to be tattooed on every cell in my body. Adventure, discovering the unknown, challenging myself, and learning what was happening beyond the realm of my present world: these were my driving forces. Years earlier I had already set my thoughts on working in China.

Why? Probably because China had just reemerged on the scene, it was the world's biggest unknown, mysterious and misunderstood. My dream certainly wasn't to protest on the wet cobbled streets of Brussels.

My first attempt to control my destiny was not very encouraging either. After graduation, I ended up with a temp job washing and renting out cars at the airport. . . . But at least it gave me the freedom to continue hunting down my simple dream.

In the meantime all my friends picked up plush jobs and got company cars. 'You're a madman, you're squandering potential career opportunities. What the heck do you care about China? There's nothing there,' one would say. Another would snicker at the thought alone. 'China? A communist country! Are you indifferent to what just happened there?'

No argument was strong enough; the inexorable urge to go to China never left me.

'What to do now?' were the words that kept banging in my head. The China virus had contaminated me, and was slowly but surely eating into my sanity.

'In which direction can I steer my life now that working in China is all but out of the question?' I became rudderless for a while. I was lost but too stubborn to admit defeat.

How was it possible that events so far from my homely surroundings could affect me? Was I really cursed to continue wasting my time renting out cars at the airport?

'Maybe you should try Taiwan or Hong Kong?' proposed a whisper in my head.

But that would mean starting all over again. At that time there was no Google that would, at the flick of a finger, give you a whole list of organisations to contact by e-mail. No, it was the old typewriter that had to be pulled out of the cabinet to do all the work. The daily tasks were set on replay, like an old record player with a needle stuck somewhere in the middle of a melancholy song. Rummage through the professional magazines in libraries to find contact addresses, type letters between my two shifts, mail them around to companies or organisations that might assist fresh graduates in starting a career abroad. And then an excruciating wait for answers. The rush to the mailbox became a daily ritual.

It took weeks to get replies, which most always started with: '*We've read your letter with great interest. . . .*' and ended with '*. . . but unfortunately there's presently no vacancy for someone with your background.*

*Please allow us to keep your profile in our data base and blah blah blah. . . .*

Every letter, before I opened it, drove my mood to the highest of peaks, and then brought it crashing down with the opening sentence. And so it went for several months. I spent hour after hour looking for opportunities that were closely or even remotely related to China. It even got so bad that the staff in the libraries already knew me by name. Sometimes my steadfast determination would be jolted by a mischievous thought that flashed through my brain: 'It's so hard to find a job in the Far East. Is this really worth all the hassle? How long would I search? How many more rental cars would I race from point A to B? How many more grumpy customers? How many more pranks could we pull over the airport loudspeakers, before the information desk discovered that the person I was paging – 'Mr Aihait Maisdu Pitjab' – was only imaginary, and that they were declaring over the PA: 'Attention! Attention! Mister I hate my stupid job. Please come to the information desk!'

Seeing the flow of businessmen coming and going from behind my rental desk I often thought that taking a real job in my familiar surroundings might be the easiest way out of my purgatory. But this nasty temptation quickly dissolved, as if some inner compass refused to lose track of that 'simple' dream: to work in China.

Sometime in September, out of the blue, a telephone call came: 'Sir, would you still be interested in working with our organisation in China? The previous position in Xi'an is already filled, so we're not sure yet to which university you'll be posted. But we have a job opening for you with the Chinese Ministry of Education. It's quite urgent, as classes will start beginning of next month. Could you please give us a reply in the next couple of days?'

I gave a firm yes on the spot.

On a cold morning in October, together with eight other pilgrims, I stood in the departure hall of Brussels Airport – not to rent out cars, but to make a great leap forward in my life. Everyone was excited about our bold journey into the unknown. Like any airport, this huge chemical reactor, which boiled up a roller coaster of emotional peaks and valleys at both the Arrivals and Departure levels, didn't disappoint

either. Behind me a lot of people were left in tears, but I couldn't help but think that my China obsession would work out. I told everybody, 'This will be a great opportunity to open a new gateway for all of us to reunite in unfamiliar territory.'

The trip, with a couple of changeovers, crisscrossed through a string of cities: Brussels, Amsterdam, Rome, Bangkok, Singapore, Shanghai and at long last Beijing. At the time China was still considered a backwater, and no airline worth the name would fly on a regular basis directly from any Western-European airport into Beijing Capital Airport. Unless you were flying with Pakistan Airlines or the East German Interflug, the voyage into the Middle Kingdom would snake the intrepid traveller around the globe.

'Ladies and gentlemen, we'll be landing at Beijing Capital Airport in around thirty minutes, at 6:20PM local time,' the pilot's voice crackled over the loudspeakers.

I had left my familiar environment roughly forty-eight hours previously. Looking outside, everything was pitch black, there was no way to perceive how high the plane was flying or where the airport was located. There was nothing that remotely looked like a city. None of the highway lights and cars we'd seen at the other airport approaches, no lit buildings in the distance. Zilch, only obscurity as far as the eye could see, with sometimes a faint flickering light in the distance, nothing more.

Then out of nowhere the runway lights appeared twenty metres beneath the plane. The pilot gave the usual welcome, and commented sarcastically that control tower had just informed him that 'There's no weather in Beijing today.'

Still looking into the pitch black, trying to detect some kind of life out there, all of a sudden I saw, in the plane's light beam, a Chinese man on a bicycle, pedalling like mad, trying to overtake the plane. Maybe this guy on the bike was the *Follow Me* to escort the plane to its designated disembarking gate?

Watching this scene unfold in front of my eyes, it instantly hit me: I was entering another world. Meanwhile, the plane was taxiing to a portal which led to a place where actions and events weren't processed in the way Westerners were imprinted with from birth.