

A Most Unlikely Freedom Haven

How would you feel about living in a place where you weren't compelled to wear seat belts or cycle helmets; where you could just set up "shop" on the pavement to sell your wares, without a license; where you could walk around in relative peace and safety; where jaywalking is encouraged, and the traffic seems to work in the absence of traffic cops and enforced speed limits; where you can eat a substantial meal for a couple of dollars; where you are not hassled when entering the country; where entrepreneurship abounds; where the gap between rich and poor doesn't breed envy, but aspiration; where smoking isn't a sin; where every modern convenience exists; where policemen are hard to find; where opportunity is everywhere; and where income tax is virtually non-existent?

I'm talking about China - where I have just made my third trip this year.

Now, I'm not saying it's necessarily a freedom haven for those already here - although it certainly seems freer in many respects than what we are used to "at home" - but I am saying that for a freedom seeker, someone who doesn't mind living in different places, it offers some unique and tempting benefits.

On my first visit to China I can recall, on the plane from Singapore, wondering what level of bureaucratic intimidation awaited me at Beijing's Capital Airport. Well, I was in for a shock. Instead of a typical "shakedown" as in the good ole' US of A, I was politely received with no inspections, no body searches, no snide comments asking "what are you doing here?", and no fingerprints or ID photo taking required!

For some reason, my expectation when arriving at the world's largest bastion of "Communism", was to be given the third degree. But it never happened.

My next shock was in the modernity of the city. Broad clean roads with loads of traffic. Driving habits a little on the crazy side. Everywhere clean and tidy, with lots of greenery. A trip to a department store quickly caused me to reevaluate my prejudgement of visiting a "developing" country - as its wares easily equalled the best the retail world has to offer - in both range and presentation.

Perhaps the hardest thing to fathom is how such a vast number of people can apparently live alongside each other in relative peace and harmony. Everywhere, people walking, talking, eating - even dancing.

There's no doubt the Chinese love to eat - usually in quite large groups. And walking down a typical side street, one is confronted by the reality that almost every third or fourth shop is in fact an eating establishment of some sort. Some are big and brassy - and very red. Others only have two or three tables - and are obviously a one-man shop. But in each case, people were eating, drinking, talking, laughing or gambling. There was a lot of shouting and laughing going on - related to some sort of beer drinking game.

Of course, Beijing offers a plethora of wonderful, historical tourist attractions - like the Great Wall and Temple of Heaven. And I did all these and more. But what most

impressed me was the tangible sense of optimism, entrepreneurship and a bustling "get up and go" - which clearly reinforces the idea of China being an economic powerhouse about to take on the whole world.

Unlike the other big nations, we're all familiar with, there is no recent history of aggression or of attacking other countries - rather a determined sense of the importance of trade and business as a means of achieving peaceful and prosperous ends.

The Chinese capacity for business and entrepreneurship is legendary and daunting - and bodes ill for the many countries now sinking under a mire of democratically imposed, ill thought-out, socialist, dead-weight legislation.

And how is this? After all, China is the land of Mao - the land of socialism. China is a one-party state - an international pariah by some "democratic" standards. How can such a country rise above and beyond its own socialist slogans - to actually become a capitalist giant in the making? And if there is any truth to the saying that the presence of advertising is the "calling card" of capitalism, then China knows how to advertise!

The Chinese have a refreshing attitude to money - not sullied by religious talk of rich men finding it difficult to pass through the eye of a needle. Not bothered about guilt as a way of life. Certainly not bothered about the gap between the rich and poor - preferring to see it as it really is, a fluid situation where people are continually moving between states, and given every incentive to rise higher. Not for China the minimum wage, or the mumbling of socialist nay sayers.

My next two forays into China were to the city of Chongqing - where I am as I write this. This bustling city is in south-west China - a major industrial centre adjacent to the Sichuan province and lying on the merging waters of the Yangtze and Jialing rivers.

Chongqing is famous for its hot and spicy food - in particular, the Chongqing Hot Pot. The main downside is the heavy pollution, which often greys out the entire city - and can irritate the throat. I was assured that plans are in place to reduce this atmospheric blight - but I imagine it will take time. However, it seems to have absolutely no effect on the locals, who appear intensely proud of their city and twin rivers.

Whatever is in the air may explain the almost anarchic driving habits of the locals. There appear to be no real road rules, apart from driving on the right - most of the time. A drive in any taxi quickly disabuses you of the notion of a heavily-policed society. I could see no police anywhere - nor any apparent sense of a speed limit. People and cars mingle freely on the roads - negotiating each other with considerable skill - coupled with liberal use of the car horn. But watch out for those covered moped taxis that dart to and fro at night - without any lights!

You can eat here in a flash restaurant (6 people), for about 450 RMB - which is around US\$54. But if you're happy with something simpler - like spicy noodles with chicken in a small cafe, then you can easily eat for 3-5 RMB - or around 30 - 50 cents USD. A typical night out for two, in a proper restaurant, usually comes in at under 100 RMB.

The modern stores are full of everything a decadent, spoiled westerner could ever want - and clothing is a particular bargain. But to put this in perspective, you can pay up to 25 RMB for a cup of coffee in a fashionable cafe - while the guy outside is cleaning the streets for 400 RMB per month.

But it's at night time that the real flavour of Chinese life becomes apparent. They don't just go home, lock the doors, switch on the TV and retire for the night. No, the night is alive with tens of thousands of people milling around the streets. Many just walking. Some sitting talking - or playing games. Others are doing exercises, or even ballroom dancing. And everywhere people are eating. So much eating - and so little obesity. There must be some important dietary secret hidden here!

Yes, of course you can still pig-out on McDonalds, KFC or Pizza Hut if you want - as they are all here. And maybe a younger generation of Chinese might be "invaded and enslaved" by western eating habits. But for most part, the apparently enthusiastic and continuous eating seems to have no impact on the nation's collective girth.

Yesterday was interesting. In the space of one street and half an hour, I witnessed the following:

A man with performing monkeys, putting on a spontaneous street show; a body-pumping demonstration of exercise to music - being lead by a couple of attractive young women, with members of the public joining in; a man writing a very long scroll in Chinese on the pavement - and attracting donations for some reason; people selling various pets - turtles, kittens, puppies, birds; advertising leaflets being handed out with abandon; shoe shine vendors plying their services; the young and hip mixed with their poor country cousins; spontaneous gambling by the roadside; mobile phones everywhere; modern Chinese music blasting out of shops; and not a policeman or obvious authority figure in sight.

I was able to have an interesting "political" conversation over dinner - with the help of one of the guests who could speak English. I moved the discussion on to politics and communism. I asked what they thought of it all. There was a surprising sense of "Oh, that? We don't believe it." One gentleman I was talking to was a newspaper columnist - and gave me a run down on why the free market was China's future. He was a no-holds-barred capitalist. Then there was the "odd" comment, when touching on international affairs, that Mao Zedong was like Bin Laden. I thought about that for a while - but couldn't decide if this was a favourable or unfavourable comparison. I have heard that same comment more than once since being here.

I can't speak for the millions of people who HAVE to live in China, or for those who may feel constrained by their political beliefs. But I can say China proves something - that economics trumps politics - and will be proven to do so, here in this so-called communist nation.

I also know that for a foreigner, who wants a place to live and "disappear" - then China would be ideal. Plenty of opportunities, great food, cheap living, no shortage of all mod cons - provided you don't mind being looked at by the locals! Although Beijing is

becoming more cosmopolitan (though not as much as Shanghai), Chongqing is decidedly short on foreigners - creating a natural curiosity amongst the locals, which often involves prolonged "staring". Like a couple of days ago, while eating in a roadside cafe, where I had to eat under the watchful gaze of the smiling, proprietor/chef!

A freedom seeker will find much to enjoy in China - not least the sense of being "left alone" - laissez faire in real time. And there is perhaps only one barrier - the length of your allowed stay - which (for most countries) appears to be one month. However, doing business allows for multiple re-entries, and as a last resort - you could always marry one of the locals!

My general impression of China is that it is literally mind- boggling. What is going on here is unprecedented in human history - an industrial transformation at the speed of light. Not for the Chinese the complaints against foreign investment. No, they chew it up as fast as it arrives. The more the better. No "PC" nonsense here - as even the official party line is only given lip service. The Chinese have much more important things to do - like making money!

China is undoubtedly on the road to global economic dominance - and just today I read, in the UK's Independent, how the last remaining British volume car maker - MG Rover - has been bailed out with one billion GBP in Chinese cash. Yes, they're buying a 70% stake in that once-famous company. It's a sign of things to come.

And is there any truth to the urban legend that China, along with Japan, could abandon the USD as their reserve currency, and peg their respective currencies to gold - in a bold pan-Asian move to monetary independence? I think China has some surprises in store.

Freedom seekers everywhere need to take off any rose-tinted glasses that may blind them to a deteriorating domestic situation or to the advantages of new environments - and see the emerging world anew. For I believe we are witnessing a huge historical power-shift that is already well underway. And being on the right side of an opening crevice is obviously the sensible place to be.