
AUSTRALIAN EX-PATRIOT IN CHINA

Belinda Lee Russell

Travelling has always felt natural for me, coming from a biracial family that moved almost every year that I was at school. But it was on the 4th of June, 1989 when I was first inspired to travel on my own. I was working at a small office that advised asylum seekers in Melbourne and usually, we received a handful of visitors a day. On this particular day, however, there were so many Mainland Chinese knocking at the door, that we had to give group information sessions. There were too many to see them all individually. It was the first time that I had met a group of Mainland Chinese and what struck me was how different they seemed from the South East Asian Chinese that I had known. (My father is from Singapore). I was fascinated by their demeanour, a little afraid of their aggression and totally set on learning more about their culture.

Xiamen

In 1991, I landed in Xiamen, formerly known as Amoy, in the southeast part of China. This city has had considerable exposure to visitors from Europe, having been a trading port with Europe since the 1500s. My father's family also originated from there before they migrated to Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore, and so I was excited about the concept of returning to my roots, or at least some of them, and discovering something about myself that I didn't yet know. Despite my conscious refusal to go with any preconceived ideas, I was shocked by my first experiences of Mainland China, not in a good or bad way necessarily, just shocked into silence with my eyes growing wider by the second. I was presented with a busy, bustling, dusty town that resembled the industrial settings of a Charles Dickens novel, but amid the warm and humid haze of the subtropics. The streets were lined with tools and equipment that I had never seen before. Everything seemed to be from a place lost in time. I had stepped into an anachronism.

A changing world

When I first arrived in Xiamen there was a large dirt road outside my apartment building. It was wide enough to be an eight-lane highway, but instead, it was a dust bowl when it was dry and a muddy swamp when it had been raining. The other foreign teachers and I wondered how this town could possibly host government officials for the ten-year anniversary of Xiamen as an economic zone when the main

street leading out of the town centre was an eyesore. But five days later, there was a sparkling black road divided by pristine white lines into lanes.

By the end of the year, half of Xiamen looked like a brand new city. Some old buildings and slums remained just to remind everyone of how far they had come. I remember commenting to a University student from northern China how it was a pity that the old buildings weren't preserved for heritage sake. He matter-of-factly replied that I would not feel that way if I had to live in one. I understood his point, but still felt sad that historical architecture was being demolished all the time in the name of fresh starts and modernity.

Fashion is a sign of hope

One obvious sign of eagerness to be modern was in the fashions. The majority of local residents wore the timeless, shapeless shirts and pants. In the market place, people's appearances did not indicate whether it was 1991 or 1901. However, a number of wealthier, fashion conscious individuals dressed in locally tailored clothes that emulated the fashion runway show on television from 1981. The show may have been ten years old, but for local fashion shops it was the latest couture. As if to make up for lost time while wearing little blue suits, being fashionably dressed in Xiamen now meant wearing every possible adornment at the same time. Gold chains and fake pearl buttons would be attached to a multi-coloured print dress with frilly trim, lace gloves and matching parasol. It was glitz and glam all over one dress, then repeated in every shop front. Those Chinese who had kept their life's savings stashed under their mattresses (it's safer than a bank) could now afford to buy lavish fashions from a rapidly increasing array of expensive boutiques, even if the quality of the merchandise was worse than what you'd find in a factory outlet. But the message was clear. Xiamen was embracing change with all its heart.

There's TV news and then, there is Chinese whispers

Watching television in China was a unique experience. It could have a very positive effect on one's general mood. News on the television was always good news. New factories were always being opened, agreements were being made and the only bad things happening were in other, far off places like Serbia. By contrast, the English-speaking newsmagazines that we had sent to us seemed to concentrate on announcing all the bad news in the world at large. Of course I discovered over time that often the most outrageous news in China - which western tabloids would advertise globally - travels faster by word of mouth. (This is possibly how 'Chinese whispers' got its name.) In the space of a year, without a mention on television news, we heard through word of mouth how some people had ended their lives after losing

their life savings on the stock market. We heard of how two university students got into a drunken brawl, how one was killed in the scuffle and the other received capital punishment a week later for his crime. We heard about a girl who was murdered by a monk because she would no longer be his girlfriend. Far from being a peaceful place, life was dramatic in this little town.

Breaking the stereotypes

When first met my colleagues, I did not match their views of a typical foreigner. I partly expected this, since I am not blond, blue-eyed or buxom, as foreigners are supposed to be. But according to the liaison officer who showed me around, I did not seem at all American. I replied that I was not American. He claimed that I was not as imposing of my views and culture as other Americans. I corrected him again, perplexed that he kept using the word 'American' as if all English speakers were from the same place. After I mentioned that I had grown up in Australia, he asked me why there was no Australian Literature. I said that there was, but perhaps it had not been read in this town yet. By the end of our conversation, I was glad that I had broken a stereotype on one hand and yet felt anonymous as an Australian on the other. But there's a freedom in anonymity, and I was happy to play that role while I observed the world around me.

Preconceived ideas

No matter where you are in the world, people will always have preconceived ideas about you, and often they are wrong. So I felt oddly hurt the first time I experienced prejudice in China. I was standing at a refreshment stall on the beautiful Gulangyu, the location of former foreign embassies and beautiful mansions that were now shared by local families with influence. As I asked the stall keeper in Mandarin for a couple of bottles of Seven-Up, a young boy of about ten mimicked me with slurred speech as if I had a speech impediment. I glared at him and he glared back, calling me a foreign devil. I could not believe how much it hurt to be cut to the quick by this little boy. For one thing, I had believed the Chinese when they said I spoke well and with an authentic accent. For another, I instantly remembered my childhood in Australia when I had been called names at a new school for looking Asian. It didn't seem fair that I be viewed as foreign now as I tried to discover my Chinese heritage. But that has always been both a bane and a blessing.

Cultural tradition alive and well

While my earlier comments might have suggested that tradition was not valued in China, my experience of people in the arts assured me otherwise. At

Lujiang Vocational University's annual student recital, for instance, I heard the stirring melodies of classical Chinese music for the first time. Like in a dream, I was transported to a time long ago when there was only romance and myth. Traditional Chinese tunes played on the *gu zhang* and the *pi pa* induced a wave of sentiment in me and I was moved me to tears. A stoic, Chinese spirit passed through me to my bones and I knew with a passion that I was in China.

My visit to Xiamen University Art Department was also a heart rendering experience. The students were extremely disciplined in producing awe-inspiring work, using both European and Chinese brushstroke painting techniques. I marvelled at the fact that the arts flourished now only fifteen years after the Cultural Revolution. I felt for those people who had lost works of art during that time, not to mention houses, families and lives.

I found that I had a lot in common with the Chinese Literature teachers, having studied literature myself. Unlike with English Literature, however, I felt that we were connecting with something much older and wiser when we discussed some famous poems and novels (that I had read in translation). I regretted only having a scanty knowledge of written Chinese, but felt that I was brushing shoulders with greatness as they told old tales and explained them to me.

Simplicity

Chinese culture is full of contradictions. Out in the street, there is a chaotic blend of horns honking and people bantering. Dust clouds rise at every step and crossing the street can be an exercise in dodging traffic, even at the lights. Inside someone's home, however, is totally different. The air is calm, quiet and clean and you feel at home in the simplest of surroundings.

It was my students who showed me that despite the flurry of change in China, there does exist a certain order. I was on a trip to Fuzhou with my students during one of their holidays. (They were about twenty years old.) It astounded me that nobody needed an alarm clock to wake him or herself up in the morning. Everyone just awoke at seven, dressed and drank tea without conversation, before packing up and leaving. Without alarm clocks, radios, or televisions blaring, we managed to conduct ourselves in perfect tranquillity.

Hidden culture

I was in Xiamen for six months before I set foot inside another person's home, and once that happened, I experienced the culture on a whole new level. It is difficult to describe the effect that this late emerging aspect of Chinese culture had on me except to say that it was ascetic. It was only when I visited people's homes that the

true character of the Chinese became apparent, and I am forever grateful for the opportunity I had to be more than just a tourist.

During my stay in Xiamen, I was provided with a very nice flat by my sponsor, which I shared with another foreign teacher. But my Chinese colleagues lived in very basic conditions. Each unmarried teacher shared a two-room place with one or two others. They each had a bunk bed – sleeping on the lower mattress and storing possessions on the upper one. There was no rug on the concrete floor, nor any curtains on the steel-framed windows. They hung their washing on a makeshift clotheslines and drank tea out of recycled pickle jars. But when we met to cook *jiaozi* (water dumplings) together, our surroundings became invisible as we enjoyed each other's company.

The hidden culture unveiled

The colleagues with whom I was closest came from all over China. Perhaps it was the shared experience of not being local that brought us together. But through our friendship, I grew to appreciate the strength and endurance of these people for living so well with so little. I also learned after eight months that I was only just beginning to know these people. In the first months, I was treated very politely but I was a foreigner. Just prior to leaving though, with less than three months to go, a rather strange thing happened. Several of my colleagues started opening up their souls to me, confiding in me with their troubles, whatever they happened to be. One cried for days over her inability to conceive without a miscarriage, a botched abortion years before being the apparent culprit. Another confided in me that she had been discriminated against at work for making friends with some American teachers in the past. At the same time, other colleagues would ask me with suspicion where I was going or whom I had just been to see. It may have been a coincidence, but I felt that I had been given an open can of worms as a sort of test, to see if I would tell others what I knew. But I didn't. There is a saying about China that the longer you stay the more silent you become, and I think that is what happened to me. I swore myself to silence.

On a lighter note, I learned a very important lesson in China about the culture and about people in general. Appearances really aren't everything. My most mouth-watering taste of cuisine was in an alleyway. There was an old couple with some bamboo steamers and a wok on a single gas burner. They could only serve two or three people at a time, and their only dish was *xiao mai* – little dumplings, so they probably didn't make much money. But in my mind, they should have made millions because from the very first bite, their dumplings were delectable. I ate there several times a week after that.

Culture shock

It was really not until I returned to Australia that I realised what I had taken for granted. Before I left, all I heard was doom and gloom about the recession, but when I returned, I saw everything with fresh eyes. The streets were wide and clean and the traffic was orderly. People formed queues at the post office instead of scrambling to be the first served. In Australia, I saw so much wealth and I felt like I was seeing it for the first time. I had been in a time warp, and returning to the twentieth century overwhelmed me. I began to wonder why I had ever left. But I had already agreed to work in Hong Kong. So after a month of visiting friends and relatives, I left Australia and embarked upon a love-hate relationship with Hong Kong that lasted eight years. But that's another story.



B. Lee Russell was born in Adelaide, South Australia to a Singaporean father and an Australian mother. She left Australia at the age of twenty-four, spent nine years in Asia and now lives in the United States with her husband and son.

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