

Monkey House Blues

A Shanghai Prison Memoir

Dominic Stevenson



Mainstream Publishing *eBooks*



About the Author

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**MAINSTREAM
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EDINBURGH AND LONDON

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Contents

Prologue

- 1** The Poisoned Yangtze
- 2** Into the Dragon
- 3** Killing the Rooster
- 4** The Company of Men
- 5** Going to Court
- 6** The Foreigners' Unit
- 7** Some Kind of Eden
- 8** The Monkey House Rules
- 9** Coming Down From the Mountain
- 10** Peshwari Mangoes
- 11** One-Way Ticket
- 12** Sex and Drugs and Mao Zedong
- 13** Going Home

Epilogue: The Road to Madrid

Postscript

'The Darkening of the Light'

In this clouded view we forget that all changes are like streams, which travel a long way underground before they come to the surface.

A Guide to the I Ching, Carol K. Anthony

Prologue

Not for the first time, Wang sat on the floor, hands cuffed behind his back, staring at the wall. With his shaven head and grey flannel uniform he resembled a wretched Buddha, moving only to reposition his cramped legs from beneath his rigid torso. He'd already had a good kicking from our top prisoner, Mr Zhao, and his crew, but this time the guards were involved, which meant the inmate being handcuffed first. Several prisoners had reported having personal belongings stolen, and a search had revealed a stash of the missing items under Wang's bed. Quite what these missing objects were was a mystery; the Chinese were forbidden any kind of personal effects anyway. The assumption was that Wang had been thieving food from other prisoners, probably some tinned pineapple or dried fish that their families had brought in on visiting days.

I stood on the landing chatting to Larry as the Chinese sat around playing cards and chewing sunflower seeds. Small mountains of sticky husks piled up on the corners of their tables as they slapped cards onto the Formica surfaces as if they were swatting invisible flies. The relative peace of the wing was broken as three guards appeared from round the corner, and the Chinese bolted upright in their seats, hands clasped in front of them. Captain Xu, looking like a man with a job to do for once, led the way, his eyes staring ahead, with Jin and Zhu close behind, glaring dutifully at the back of his head. The Chinese inmates trailed their progress down the block like automated mannequins before they stopped outside Wang's cell. The prisoner glanced sideways,

momentarily catching the green uniforms out of the corner of his eye. Xu laid a disconcerting hand on his shoulder and Wang hoisted his contorted frame off the wooden pallet of the cell floor, using his damp forehead for balance as he levered himself into an upright position. The four men walked back down the corridor, Wang's head hanging like a condemned man's, and as they filed past, the Chinese sifted through their pockets for more sunflower seeds and continued their card games.

The guards' office consisted of two cells knocked into one and was situated next to the foreigners' sitting area. The door clicked shut as we sat and looked at each other. Nobody doubted what would happen next. Wang would be gagged with a wet flannel while a second set of handcuffs was put round his ankles and tied to the existing pair round his wrists. A jug of drinking water would be poured over him for added effect and he'd lie on his stomach like the hog-tied pigs I'd seen at the markets in Guangzhou, staring into space, their petrified eyes glazed over like jellied eight-balls as they awaited their fate. But Wang knew what punishment to expect; after all, it had only been a matter of weeks since his last visit to the guards' office.

Someone tried to alleviate the tension by cracking a bad joke. Nobody laughed. A disgruntled card player at the other end of the wing began yelling at his mates, waving a greasy chicken's claw in the air like a bloodthirsty preacher, pointing accusingly at his opponents at the table. Another guy hawked a lump of phlegm into the front of his mouth, swilling the grisly globule around before lobbing the yellow slime into a stainless steel spittoon beneath the cell block window.

A caustic crackle began to radiate from inside the guards' room, the sound punctuated by harsh thuds followed by high-pitched squeals. I looked at Larry, who plunged his head down into a book he was pretending to be interested in. Jürgen appeared from his cell and sat down next to

Ludwig, who put his headphones on and began to gnaw on the end of a pencil. Gareth looked over towards me and, shaking his head, turned up his radio, hoping to drown out the hideous din of a convulsing human being eight feet away, but the radio waves picked up the electrical pulse of the cattle prods, amplifying the ghastly hum that ricocheted down the cell block like an epileptic rattlesnake. He looked up, turned off the radio and walked over to the window, where prisoners from 10th Brigade were pouring their night soil into the sewers below.

Moments later, the officers' door sprung open and Wang staggered out, flanked by two guards, their faces flushed by the adrenalin rush of their grisly work. The Chinese sat solemnly as the officers led him back to his cell, hands cuffed behind his back. Wang's face was caked in snot and tears. Pink tracks streamed down his cheeks, which twitched with muscular spasms; his eyelids drooped downwards, zombie-like, and his lashes flickered across his pupils. The three men reached Wang's cell as the Chinese cast their eyes down towards their feet shuffling beneath the tables. The prisoner stepped inside as the steel door clanged shut behind him, and the guards turned on their heels and marched back to their office.

A lone cockroach scuttled across the corridor outside the office in a bid to make it to the other side, before Officer Zhu's boot crushed it into the concrete floor. Within seconds, the officers' flunky Mr Yin appeared with a bucket and mopped up the smear of mucus and carapace. Someone grunted before tossing a nine of spades onto the table, and others followed suit as a packet of dried mango segments was passed around. The stench of slop from 10th Brigade wafted upwards from the courtyard downstairs and filled the air with an oppressive stink.

I twisted a piece of paper between my sweaty fingers, popped the imaginary cigarette into my mouth and took a lungful of make-believe smoke. Someone turned the radio

back on and we got on with our work. A week later, Wang was moved to a work farm in Xinjiang. Wenever saw him again.

[1]

The Poisoned Yangtze

It was dusk as I arrived at the central railway station in Nanjing, the capital city of Jiangsu Province, and like in most Chinese railway stations, a rambling cardboard city of itinerant labourers had sprung up on the forecourt, turning the station into a giant open-air flophouse. They were the flotsam and jetsam of China's rapid transition towards modernity, a vagabond army of involuntary trainspotters huddled under tarpaulin sheets. Their kids rummaged through piles of garbage: a pack of feral munchkins with tiny feet sore and blistered from the cruel work. It was embarrassing for the government to admit there were some 110 million of these people drifting around the country looking for work, and so this official estimate was likely to be conservative. Though the mass exodus of Chinese from the countryside to the vast urban sprawls of the nation's cities had created an endless source of cheap labour for the local factory owners, the limited accommodation had encouraged makeshift shanty towns to spring up, often outside train stations. Having left their poverty-stricken villages with nothing, many were unable to return even if they wanted to. Those unable to find work or accommodation often ended up being arrested for vagrancy and were put into police-owned factories not unlike prisons. Later I would discover that Chinese police officers could put people in these places for three years without even taking them to court.

My hotel room was much fancier than I'd grown accustomed to while travelling in China. I'd generally paid a couple of dollars for a dormitory bed, but since few hotels were allowed to give rooms to tourists, the ones that did tended to be the larger four-star establishments. I was using the room to repackage the hashish I had brought across China from the Hindu Kush and needed complete privacy. I slumped on the bed as the fan blades cut the air above. I was paranoid about my impending mission, and money was low after an epic trek from the mountains of Pakistan to the east coast of China. The last phase of the trip, though comparatively short in distance, had the most obstacles, with the Japanese port of Kobe the final destination. Japanese customs checks were likely to be rigorous, and the best way to avoid detection would be to swallow the hash on the two-day boat ride. First I had the unenviable task of wrapping the dope into individual pellets, a laborious 12-hour job that I was not looking forward to. My room reminded me of a Japanese love hotel, with its large mirrors on the walls and garish furnishings. It was expensive, too, but the receptionist had let me put it on a Visa card, so I could worry about that later.

The next morning, I set to work dismantling my guitar bag. The hash had been rolled into squares, vacuum-packed and slid into the lining of the leather bag. The seams had been sewn together by the wife of an Afghan tribesman above a shop in Peshawar, and I cut through the stitches with a penknife and pulled out the leathery sheets. The hash was perfect for the job, and the summer heat made the bendy sheets easy to roll between my fingers into four-gram pieces.

Five years earlier, I'd sat in a New Delhi hotel room in the middle of a sweltering Indian summer with three hundred grams of *charas* in front of me. Unlike hashish, which is pressed pollen and consequently has a pliable, plasticine quality when warm, *charas* is made by rubbing the heads of

marijuana plants until the clammy resin begins to stick to the palms of the hands, after which it is collected and rolled into(usually) ten-gram sticks. It often has a woody, peaty texture that does not like to be reconstituted, and working the stuff into bite-sized pieces was arduous. I'd bought this particular batch from an Indian sadhu (holymen) at short notice, and it was poor quality. The long bus ride from Manikaran, high up above the Kulu Valley in India's northern Himachal Pradesh province, had been uneventful and relatively pleasurable under the circumstances. I'd packed the dope inside a hollowed-out pineapple amongst a bag of fruit in the hold of the bus and felt relaxed with the many police checkpoints on the way down. Wrapping the stuff was more problematic, but I eventually developed a system that involved cutting a tube of cling film into four-inch sections, securing one of the rolls between my knees and stretching the plastic around the hash, while turning the edges inwards. Done properly, the plastic clings tightly to the dope for days inside the body and passes through without any problem.

It was widely believed to be the safest way of transporting smallish quantities of hash before the arrival of X-ray machines. Of course it wasn't foolproof, and if the shit hit the fan there was no way you could deny having it. At least with a suitcase you could plead ignorance and claim to have been duped. As far as I know, no jury has ever acquitted someone with a gutful of hash. What made this method appealing to many people like myself was the low risk factor in the country of departure. You could eat the pellets in your hotel room and forget about them till you arrived at the other end. In the '60s and '70s, very few people got locked up in places like India and Morocco, and if they did, a modest bribe was usually enough to secure a swift release. By the '80s, massive pressures (not to mention 'foreign-aid' enticements) were put on the governments of drug-producing countries to join the West's War on Drugs.

International borders became much harder to penetrate, while prison sentences were often longer in the countries where you bought the dope than in the countries where the contraband was headed. At the time of writing, India, for example, is handing out mandatory ten-year sentences for possession of more than ten grams of hashish - an amount that is unlikely to lead to court action in most European countries. Not only were the sentences harsher, but also legal representation was often non-existent, while jail conditions were sometimes medieval and corruption was rife. However, international borders are not as they used to be, as the threat of terrorism has eclipsed even the drugs trade. By the mid-'80s, Asian and South American prisons had begun to see many Westerners being held on various drug charges, and a 'home' bust with access to family, legal representation and decent living conditions was far preferable to being stuck in some dungeon halfway across the world. The discomfort of swallowing and unwrapping hashish became a small price to pay for avoiding that fate.

Although I liked the outlaw factor, I had no great love for the dope business. Some of my mates loved it, but I concentrated on market trading, English teaching, bar work and busking. Living in Japan in the '80s there was plenty of money to be made legitimately, and I enjoyed working for a living, though it could nonetheless be routine and boring. Various foreign friends had been held for long periods of time in solitary confinement for minor hash offences, while Japanese friends had had their lives ruined for years by their intimidating police force. I saw dope smuggling as a way of testing my karma and getting away from the humdrum world of work. It was the last-chance saloon where you stood to lose everything with one roll of the dice, and it made me feel some kind of affinity with the outlaws of my favourite folk songs. I got a buzz from the knowledge that it could all come crashing down at any moment, though with hindsight it was pure foolishness.

The guitar-bag scam had made the endless police checkpoints that litter the journey along the Indus Valley and over the Khunjerab Pass into China relatively hassle-free. I'd lost count of the times officials had looked at the instrument while I grinned and made air guitar gestures before being waved on. Now I was sitting on my bed after several thousand miles, marvelling at the quality of the much sought-after Afghan hash and rolling the sticky strips into torpedoes.

Pakistan is one of the best places in the world to buy hash, and it's pretty hard to find a poor-quality smoke in the entire country. The exported version known as red seal or 'paki black' is another story. The middlemen who shift vast quantities of the stuff around the world mix it with various other materials, creating a cheap, user-friendly product that bears little resemblance to what you can buy on any street corner inside the country. I'd been assured by the Afghan trader I'd bought mine from that it was top-quality produce from the Afghan hash mecca of Mazar I Sharif, the main city of northern Afghanistan. I suspected he told all his customers this, which was exactly what they wanted to hear. The hills around Mazar are said to be one of the oldest hash-growing regions in the world and were a major stopover point for travellers on the hippy trails of the '60s and '70s.

After the Russians invaded Afghanistan in 1979, millions of refugees fled to the border towns of Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province. Peshawar became the main base for the CIA's proxy war with the superpower to Afghanistan's north, and it was here that America first began its unholy alliance with the renegade Saudi warrior Osama bin Laden, arming and training his fighters against the Soviets. By the time I got to Pakistan, in 1993, the invaders had long gone and the country had descended into its now familiar quagmire of feuding warlords and endless civil war. Still, Peshawar had prospered and was now the base for various mujahideen

groups vying for control of the country's lucrative opium trade.

I worked on the pellets all day, stretching the cling film tight to keep every piece perfectly sealed, and by six o'clock in the evening had 108 torpedoes to swallow on the boat. Although I didn't consider China's borders to be a serious hurdle, I planned to take the precaution of packing the pieces in foreign food parcels that I'd seen on sale in foreign food or Friendship Stores. These shops were found in all the major Chinese cities and were comparatively expensive. They catered for Westerners and wealthy Chinese and sold things like mini Mars Bars and Milky Ways. I decided that as soon as I got to Shanghai I'd buy a couple of packets of chocolate bars, open the packages individually, remove the chocolate and put two or three pieces of hash in each one before supergluing them up again. It seemed unlikely that any Chinese customs man would know what a Mars Bar was, and it was common practice for passengers to take their own food onto the ferries. The only potential problem was getting the bag of dope to Shanghai. I'd wandered around Nanjing looking for a Friendship Store but had run out of time, and after so many train journeys in China I had no reason to think this one would be any different. I found an obscure inside pocket in my rucksack and decided it would do for the relatively short journey to Shanghai, and with the hash finally wrapped I rolled a large joint with some of the leftovers and drifted into a deep sleep.

Some hours later, the distant sound of firecrackers woke me. It was past midnight and I was hungry, so I wandered into town to find something to eat. All the restaurants in the area had closed, but there were a few mobile street stalls serving noodles and rice with pork and vegetables. I sat and chatted to the vendor in my rather silly combination of pidgin English and sign language that seems to go quite a long way anywhere in the world, and drank a can of Chinese cola. By the time I'd eaten, I'd managed to establish some

kind of vague directions to get to the nearest point of the Yangtze River and wandered off into the night to see the Far East's greatest waterway.

Three years earlier, I'd made a similar pilgrimage to the spiritual lifeblood of India, the Ganges. It had been one of the greatest days of my life, a day that had come to represent all that was wonderful about the rambling existence I'd chosen. Walking with my girlfriend, Rosie, by the ghats in Varanasi, I knew that this was as good as it gets; not only was I in one of the most beautiful and fascinating places in the world, but I was in love, too. Sitar and tablas emanated from every doorway, while Hindu pilgrims - intoxicated by the sheer pulsating energy of the place - moved around us in a daze. I'd read about the river's legendary powers and marvelled at the thought of the astonishing faith that billions of people had invested in it for thousands of years. Even the British had bought into the river's magic. There were tales of how the ships of the East India Company had taken the river's sacred drinking water from Calcutta to London without the customary stopover in the Cape since the Ganges' water stayed fresh for the entire voyage.

Once I drank it at a party in Goa - a thimbleful infused with California Sunshine, a particularly potent type of LSD. Within minutes I could see the bones in my hands as the translucent skin fell away. For some time after, every person I saw was a skeleton. It was extraordinary. Everyone at the party was naked. I walked around feeling embarrassed, as if I were fully dressed on a nudist beach. No experience with any drug has ever repeated this unique state of mind, but I'd read of such experiences being attained naturally by Indian yogis after many years of deep meditation, and the Ganges lay at the very centre of these miracles. Now the great river was in front of me, crystal clear and still, as the rains had long since dried up for that year. When I eventually rinsed my hands in the river, I felt a rush of

energy through my arms, while my fingers and palms experienced an extraordinary pins-and-needles-type sensation. It reminded me of the electric baths used by elderly arthritic Japanese in their public washhouses, as the currents rippled through my arms and around my torso.

The intervening years had been good to me, the happiest of my life. Now I stood once again in front of a great Eastern river, only this time I was alone. There was very little light as I made my way down a gangway to the water's edge, and it was impossible to see for more than a few metres due to a heavy mist. I thought of Charles Dickens's Pip on the marshlands of *Great Expectations*. Squatting on the riverbank, I sank my hands into the water and felt a shiver down my spine. Unlike the Ganges, the Yangtze had a static, lifeless quality. I quickly withdrew my hands and noticed a pungent, rancid smell. The water was putrid and my hands felt tainted by the texture of the black liquid. Far from feeling energised, I immediately sought out fresh water to wash the slimy sensation off my hands, but had to make do with a piece of grubby old newspaper lying close by. I wandered back to my hotel looking forward to having a shower. My first touch of one of the greatest rivers in the world had been gloomily ominous.

The night train from Beijing stopped in Nanjing at 3 a.m., and I was hoping I'd be able to get a ticket at the station. The Shanghai Express was due to arrive at around six, so I'd have to find somewhere to get breakfast before the hotels opened. My financial problems were compounded by not being able to get any money out on my credit card. My original plan to hang out in Shanghai for a few days began to look unrealistic, and I had no idea how I was going to pay for the ferry to Japan. I took a cab to the station with a sense of foreboding. Three weeks had passed since I'd bought the hash from the Afghan in Peshawar, and I was days away from seeing my friends in Kyoto, but the toughest challenges lay ahead.

As I walked towards Nanjing station with the usual retinue of hustlers and would-be baggage carriers in tow, I noticed a police checkpoint at the entrance to the station. Around a dozen officers were standing around a conveyor belt, loading the luggage into what appeared to be an X-ray machine. I began to feel intensely paranoid and considered making a swift about-turn and returning to the hotel when one of the officers, seeing I was a foreign tourist, signalled me to walk around the checkpoint. It turned out that there had been a series of explosions on trains in the district caused by passengers carrying fireworks in their luggage. Thankfully, foreign tourists were not deemed a threat and were exempt from these checks. It was unlikely that the contents of my rucksack would be detected by the X-ray, but I became acutely aware of the random nature of the hazards that could appear at any time now that the hash was no longer built into my guitar bag.

I was well aware of the dangers of being caught with hashish in Pakistan or Japan, but China had never seemed the kind of place where the police would want to get involved. I'd had a few brief encounters with the police on trains and once after a dispute over a bar bill in Beijing. A bar owner had tried to charge me ten times the normal price for a bottle of beer on the street, and a passer-by had intervened when it looked like I was about to get a hiding. Later I was embarrassed to discover I'd unwittingly bought an imported beer that was correctly priced. The officers who happened to be walking by at the time went to some lengths to ignore me, partly, no doubt, because they could not speak English, but also because foreigners seemed to be outside of the local laws and customs. Obviously this was an arrogant assumption to make; however, there were good reasons for it. Tourists had their own currency called 'foreign exchange certificates' and were forbidden to stay in the majority of the hotels where Chinese stayed. Since the government went to great lengths to separate foreigners

from the general populace, it was more trouble than it was worth to get involved with them, and most Chinese were disinclined to have any contact with tourists. Also, tourists were affectionately called 'guests', and hassling them at checkpoints would be tantamount to inviting friends to dinner and frisking them on the door. Since tourists were considered wealthy it was presumed they would not commit crimes, and even if they did it would be awkward for the average Chinese policeman to intervene.

After the shock of meeting a police checkpoint outside the station, the six-hour train journey from Nanjing to Shanghai passed by uneventfully. The carriage was draughty but humid, and the nicotine-stained windows gave the platform lights an amber glow. An affluent-looking mother and son sat opposite me speaking Mandarin, and I took the opportunity to make small talk to pass the time. They spoke excellent English and came across as the kind of upper-class Chinese I'd had little experience of before. The boy was dressed like an English public schoolboy in a navy-blue blazer and tie, while his mother wore an expensive-looking fur coat. She reminded me of an opera star or the wife of a rich industrialist, while her son was a proper Lord Fauntleroy. They were visiting relatives in Shanghai and asked me what I liked about their country. It was a question I'd been asked many times before; I had a standard reply in which I praised the delicious food, dramatic scenery and friendly people. It involved a slight bending of the truth. The food was good, but much of the country was now hideously ugly and not always friendly. Communism had ripped the guts out of the place, with its vile architecture and divisive social policies, but I was aware my enthusiasm for the country had begun to wane after I had caught hepatitis A. The debilitating illness had made it difficult to enjoy the most basic pleasures of travelling. Simply leaving my hotel room had become exhausting, so there was no question of sightseeing. I'd had to give up the beer, too, which is one of

the pleasures of Chinese travel. It was ridiculously cheap and, when ice-cold, perfectly pleasant. I'd spent many hours on trains enjoying it. Hawkers sold it on railway-station platforms, out of large Perspex iceboxes, and it was fun to share with train-compartment colleagues on long journeys. I'd taken an epic 54-hour train ride from Lanzhou to Guangzhou and had drunk several large bottles on the way. I nodded off and woke up dehydrated, so I headed off down the carriage looking for water. Chinese trains have large boiling-water tanks so everyone can get a free cup of green tea, and I found one soon enough. The tap had a red sign in Chinese hanging over it, but I helped myself anyway. The water was lukewarm, but my thirst couldn't wait. A man saw me drinking it and wagged his finger while pointing at the sign. I carried on. That, I assume, was the night I got hepatitis. Sensible people write off their travels when struck down by such diseases, but I was determined to carry on, stumbling from one escapade to the next, with pallid skin and Lucozade piss, desperately trying to get back to Japan.

As the train neared Shanghai, I managed to cheer myself up at the thought of being back in Kyoto in just a few days. There would be friends to visit, and I'd be able to track down Rosie's whereabouts. I planned a trip to the *sentō*, the hot baths that are found on the street corners of every Japanese residential district. Although I was travelling with a guitar, I missed my musician friends and was getting bored playing alone in hotel rooms. As Japan's cultural centre, Kyoto had an eclectic mixture of different kinds of music, including jazz, blues, house and heavy rock. The Beatles still reigned as the kings of pop and could be heard on every jukebox in every bar across the country. Paul McCartney's early '80s dope bust had been a huge event in the Japanese media and had given even the most squeaky-clean member of the band the kind of outlaw folk-hero status usually reserved for the group's bad boy, John Lennon. I was nervous about arriving in Japan with the hash, well aware of the kind of

grilling I could expect if suspected, but I'd run out of money and didn't want to hang out working in Japan any longer than necessary. I'd make some money and buy a plane ticket to wherever Rosie was. All I had to do was get on the boat and relax. There was nothing to it; everything would be fine.

A taxi driver nodded to me outside the station and I threw my guitar and rucksack onto the back seat and slid in next to them. It was my first visit to China's most populated city and I was unsure how long it would take me to get a ticket for the boat to Japan. The journey to the hotel took me through the heart of what was once the centre of Britain's attempt to penetrate the Middle Kingdom. The Bund had few of the charms of its former colonial glory, and the sedan chairs that had carried Europeans around the streets of the city had been replaced by plush taxis that carried the city's well-heeled inhabitants from A to B. Where once an international police force ran a cordoned-off section of the city for the benefit of the expat community, the Chinese were now very much back in command. A Public Security van, siren blazing, belted past the cab as it turned into Nanjing Street, the centre of Shanghai's nightlife. The last of the night's revellers walked down the pavements beneath huge billboards advertising Japanese and American goods, while a tramp in a blue-denim Mao suit rummaged through a rubbish bin outside a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet. It was the middle of the night, but the street was well lit with gaudy neon signs that splattered down the sides of shop facades, while Western music boomed out of doorways.

The cab pulled up outside the Pujing Hotel, and I passed a 20-yuan note to the driver and waited for the change. A scraggy white cat squealed as the doorman leered at it with a broom from the hotel entrance, and I walked into the huge foyer, where an elderly clerk peered over his glasses.

'No room tonight,' the man said tartly before I had a chance to ask.

‘Are there any other hotels in the area? I’m taking a ferry to Japan in the morning and need a place to rest for a few hours.’

‘No room.’

He cast his eyes across the room to a large sofa in the corner. I’d been planning to use the room to transfer my newly wrapped dope into the mini-Mars Bar wrappers I intended to buy later in the morning. My scam depended on being able to have my own space for at least an hour or so, but I was too tired to go looking for another hotel so I took a towel out of my bag and lay down. It seemed like I’d barely fallen asleep when an acrid, sulphurous smell wafted up into my nostrils. A janitor was pushing a mop around my makeshift bed, slopping ammonia across the cold stone floor. Glancing up at the clock above the reception desk, I saw it was 6.30, and the clerk I’d met earlier had been replaced by another man, who resembled a Chinese Charles Hawtrey, the actor from the old Carry On films. Unsurprisingly there was still no room, so I asked if I could make use of the shower in the meantime. The receptionist slapped his hand down on the bell on his desk and a small, elderly but sprightly bellhop appeared in a traditional Chinese tunic with a friendly smile.

‘How can I be of assistance to you, sir?’

‘I’d like a shower and a place to keep my luggage until I can book a room, please.’

‘Certainly. I have already taken it upon myself to put your musical instrument into the storage room, thus preventing the possibility of its theft. There is, alas, an escalating incidence of larceny across China’s eastern-seaboard towns, sir.’

I was astonished at the bellhop’s long-winded use of the English language and was reminded of the occasions on which I’d met educated people on the Indian subcontinent who still spoke in a kind of Raj-era dialect rarely heard in post-’50s Britain. I wanted to stop and have a chat with him,

imagining he'd have interesting tales to tell about Shanghai in the colonial period, but the receptionist rudely interrupted us and sent him on his way. I felt sorry for him; he was clearly an educated man forced to accept a menial job, being ordered around by intellectual inferiors who treated him like a worthless flunky. I imagined he'd had a grim time of it during the brain-dead years of Mao's Cultural Revolution, when the educated were endlessly hounded and philistinism was brutally enforced as a state religion. I decided that I'd make an effort to have a chat with him after I'd bought my ticket, and wandered off into the city for breakfast.

In the light of day, the city had lost much of the sparkle of the night before. Without the neon signs the buildings were bland and indifferent, while the crowds had grown into oppressive hordes. There seemed little point in taking a taxi because the traffic did not appear to be moving significantly faster than walking pace, and if the receptionist's directions were accurate I didn't have far to go. Eventually I found a large building that supposedly had a travel agent on the sixth floor, and after a few enquiries I discovered the agency on the eighth. It was good news. A boat was leaving the docks at midday for Kobe, and crucially, I could pay using my credit card, which was not giving me any cash. Since I was down to my last few dollars I had little choice but to buy the ticket, but time was running out and I'd yet to buy the mini Mars Bars that were the key to my safe passage out of China. I headed straight to the nearest Friendship Store on Nanjing Street, a vast emporium of international goods stacked high with everything from Indian spices to Johnnie Walker whisky.

With the benefit of hindsight it's easy to see where we make our mistakes, but I've never managed to work out how I spent a good 45 minutes in the department store and left without what I'd gone in there to buy. I remember the exquisite jade carvings, the high-quality Korean leather

jackets, the ginseng elixirs and Dragon Well green teas, but I can't recall even seeing the foreign-food section. I'm sure it was there, and doubtless they had something at least similar to what I was looking for, but I left with nothing.

As well as failing to repack my dope, I didn't have enough money to book a hotel room to make the swap anyway. Had I stopped to think for five minutes, it would have been obvious that my mission was falling apart. The most important part of the Chinese leg of the mission had collapsed, but I was past the point of no return: nothing could stop me now.

It was gone ten when I got back to the hotel and I was frantic to leave. Although the boat left at twelve, passengers were required to board at eleven, and I had no idea how long the journey to the port would take, or if I had enough money for the taxi. My rucksack and guitar were in the hotel's storage room, and I was unable to find anyone to unlock the door for me. The Charles Hawtrey lookalike ignored me, and the bellhop had disappeared. I paced the floor for ten minutes, chain-smoking cheap Chinese cigarettes, when a man appeared who could apparently help me.

'The bellhop is taking his morning break and will be back shortly. He is the only person who has a key to the storage room.'

'But I have a ship to Japan that boards in 45 minutes and I have to get a taxi to the port.'

'I do not have a key; you'll have to wait till the bellhop comes back.'

I smoked another cigarette. Then another. I was pacing the floor in a sweat now, and the spindly clerk was peering over his glasses looking at me contemptuously. Finally I'd had enough.

'Look, I gave my luggage to you people for safe keeping, and you knew full well I had a boat to catch at midday - where's my fucking bag!'

The last syllables were delivered with such force the clerk nearly jumped out of his skin. Other tourists who were checking into the hotel turned their heads disapprovingly. I was making a scene. A friendly Western bystander tried to help, but I shrugged off his well-intentioned efforts and lit another cigarette off the one I was smoking. Deciding there wasn't much else I could do, I sat down on the sofa that I'd slept on earlier and ran my sweaty hands through my hair, when suddenly the bellhop appeared. He had a gleeful look in his eyes, a smile on his face and was holding my rucksack in his arms with the guitar bag strapped over his shoulder. I grabbed both from him and stormed out of the door without saying a word of thanks. Within seconds, a cab drew up and I threw my luggage onto the back seat. Behind me, a pleasant-looking Chinese lady who bore a striking resemblance to my mother attempted to sell me some postcards. I swung round and told her to fuck off as I slammed the cab door behind me and ordered the driver to take me to the port. Looking out of the back window of the cab, I could see the poor woman looking bewildered as the cab pulled away. Further back, the bellhop was standing in the doorway of the hotel with a concerned look on his face. I turned around again and didn't look back.

Shanghai's port area had a desolate air about it. Enormous cranes like gigantic Meccano creations could be seen on the horizon picking up huge containers and plonking them unceremoniously onto waiting ships. From a distance the docks seemed to have been abandoned, and I wondered whether the cab that had just left me on the quay with my luggage in my hands had got the wrong place. Aware of the diminishing time, I walked quickly towards the entrance to the Japan-ferry terminal and glanced nonchalantly at a few customs officers milling about in the doorway. The sight of uniforms had ceased to represent any kind of authority to me in China. There was nothing intimidating about their standardised dress and their role