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China Calling

During November 2000 I remembered seeing a programme on French television concerning the First World War. It was about how the Chinese, allies to the British and French, sent over hundreds of men to help dig the trenches in the North of France. A whole village was used to billet these men who brought their Chinese traditions as well as their opium addiction, a sad legacy left by the British imperialism in China. Most of them died, not in battle, but due to the cold and influenza that they caught while digging the trenches. A lonely forgotten monument still stands to them in a farmer's field.

As I had been pursuing for a number of years, a vision to "redeem the dreams" of all that was lost through the First World War this vision of something to "redeem" from China sowed quite a prayer burden in my heart. For a number of days, I began to pray more for China. Imagine my delight when in early December 2000, a colleague rang me up and asked if I would like to go to China with him….. in the next 10 days! Despite creating some disruption to my schedule, it was an offer I couldn't refuse.

I began to pray and read up on the culture and history of China. The influence of men like Lao-Tzu and Confucius to form the Chinese world view cannot be underestimated. In a nutshell both were concerned with explaining the "eternal order" known as "Tao". Lao-Tzu emphasised the Tao as manifested in nature. Confucius emphasised humanity and social relationships. Confucius emphasised the past and its wisdom. Lao-Tzu emphasised the present experience. God, it seems, is always at work in any culture preparing an environment to receive the beautiful revelation of Christ in their own cultural context. Indeed, the Chinese translation of Christ's statement in John 14:6:

"I am the way", is

"I am the Tao."

I was also struck by the way recent history had modelled the nation, and having lived in France for many years, the home of the great "Sun King" Louis Quatorze, I was particularly interested in the influence of the *"Versailles Treaty"*.

After having been on the allies side (albeit briefly and perhaps politically), the Chinese were hoping to regain the territory that the Germans had taken over. At this time the eyes of the youth and intelligentsia of China were very much looking to the West for a model of society.

Woodrow Wilson, the American President, in fear of being manipulated by Japan, conceded the German conquests of China to the Japanese instead of giving it back to China. This was seen as a gross betrayal of China by the West, and emphasised the idea of the "foreign devil" and Western Imperialism. The youth were especially disillusioned by this event which led to street riots and the founding of the May 4th movement. The eyes of the youth and the intellectuals turned from the West to the Russian revolution.

One of those youth was Mao Zedong who was involved in the founding of the Communist Party in 1920. What price betrayal? The treaty was also hard on Germany and the humiliating conditions imposed contributed to the later rise of Hitler and Fascism.

It is a sad thought that the seed of betrayal and revenge sown from Versailles (the Sun King's palace) in France, led to the twin evils of Communism and Fascism, and inspired the rise of Mao Zedong and Hitler.

Few people have heard of the Taiping rebellion (1850-64), and yet it was a pivotal event in forming the mind set of China. In 1850 Hung Hsui-Ch'ian, a dismal civil servant who failed the Confucian exams 4 times, joined up with a fundamentalist Presbyterian missionary to investigate the claims of Christianity.

The missionary soon split with him, but this man had a 'perverted' religious zeal, thinking he was the brother of Christ. He wanted to see China as a Christian republic and tried replacing the Emperor with a view to turning all of the nation's property over to the people. He was not afraid to use violence to see this happen. The results of this rebellion, and this is hard to believe, was that it became one of the most destructive conflicts in history with up to 30 million people perishing ! I'm perpetually amazed at the world's lack of knowledge of such an awesome conflict which is why it is getting a mention in this small introduction to China !

This was only 150 years ago and it helped me see the danger of "mass movements" in China and why the government is so wary of religious movements outside of their control.

Anyway, before I get you too bogged down in a treatise on Chinese history, lets get back to the visit and the on the ground reality.

The well known phrase of Napoleon concerning China as a sleeping giant :

"Leave that giant alone for when it awakes the world will tremble."

came back to me with force as I stepped onto Chinese ground after a long flight. The cities are enormous with high rise buildings shooting up on every street corner. New businesses are rapidly gaining ground and Western multi national companies are putting up their well recognised signs.

China is passionately energetic and hungry for progress and goods of all shapes and sizes. ! It wants its fair share of the world's pie now!

The population and potential for growth is phenomenal. Hard working, low paid workers teemed the streets while construction workers, perched precariously on bamboo scaffolding, were reaching ever higher heavenwards offering another skyscraper to the gods of materialism. The lethargic West is already showing signs of strain while China runs eagerly on into its destiny. A destiny that may influence the world for better... or for

worse. A destiny that may lie in the vulnerable wounded hands, black bunched heads and tear stained eyes of the Chinese Christians. China imposes itself as a prayer priority on any world strategy.

Meeting up with brothers and sisters in the underground church must count as one of the greatest privileges of my life. Like most Christian groups in China they were suffering persecution and their training school had been discovered and some of the young students beaten, tortured and imprisoned. It was a humbling experience listening to their testimonies. The group are beginning to come around to thinking of a more 'city' based training, revolving around English teaching and computing. While praying together the Lord impressed on me a prophetic word inspired from Matthew 23.37 :

> *"...how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings..."*

God values the persecution and suffering but it seems he is also **longing** to create a **covering** which will allow the church to gather and be **nurtured**. The Chinese church is strong in martyrdom and evangelism - God wants to care for it as well. As a mother cares for her young.

We prayed much into the "wings" which need to come into place to 'cover' the missionary army in training. Many are inspired by the options of using business as a means to penetrate society and some are setting up an employment agency.

> *"The kingdom of God is like ..." an employment agency !"*
>
> *Matthew 20:1*

As the Bejing Olympics approach it is vitally important to pray that somehow the doors will open and that the many Christians will have a platform to share as the world looks on.

Another highlight was a "team social evening" watching the Gladys Aylewood film - *"The Inn of the 6th happiness."* I thought this a most 'prophetic' film with a young generation being 'mothered' and led over the mountains into the city. Gladys Aylewood became known as Jenai! (literally - "The one who loves people." JEN is also the centre of Confucian teaching - generally taken to be a compassionate love for humanity or for the world as a whole. A variety of translations have been proposed.) What greater missionary incarnation could there be ?

A teaching seminar was arranged. I really couldn't understand why such quality men and women should want to learn from a cosseted Westerner like myself. I was the true learner, clumsily holding chopsticks like the worn out theology I was steeped in. After a long train journey filled with unknown conversation and endless snacks of fruit and rice we arrived. We met folk and enjoyed wonderful fellowship and hospitality. Just before going to bed a Chinese leader knelt down, and gently taking a bowl of warm water

and a towel he proceeded to wash my feet... It was to be the last gesture of the conference for me.

Having settled down to pray and to sleep we were suddenly roused by a sharp knock on the door.

"We have problems. The police are here. You need to go."

We quickly got dressed, grabbed our stuff, and followed our young Chinese colleagues outside. We could hear shouts, torch lights piercing the darkness and the ominous echoes of dogs barking.

We slipped clumsily through the night until we reached the home of a kindly older lady. She was willing to hide us but we felt the risks were too great for her and decided to make a run for it over the frosty, foggy fields. Our boots were caked with mud and our clothes whitened with the frosty dew. Silently breathless we ran on for more than two hours, every shadow representing the possibility of arrest and incarceration. The danger was all the more real for our Chinese colleagues who refused leave us despite our pleas for them to go home.

We eventually managed to flag down a van and take a very round-a-bout trip to another station and then another long train journey back to the 'safety' of a larger town. Although all this was a bit surreal for us it was only too real for our Chinese colleagues and is part of their everyday lives. Happily, nothing was found and our brothers did not get into any further trouble. I later learnt that the police had come to the village searching for bank robbers who had just happened to rob a bank that evening ! In that uncanny co-incidence we came close to disaster as we could so easily have been mistaken for the robbers as we ran over the fields. It would also have been hard for our Chinese brothers to explain why Westerners were with them in the house. The experience seemed to confirm the necessity to put into place the "covering wings" for future ministry trips. It seems so costly to risk so much for the teaching of a few Westerners.

It was uplifting to be able to join the worship of Chinese brothers and sisters in later meetings.. I was challenged by the strength, ministry and commitment of the young ladies in the churches. There is something very beautiful and "bride like" in the Asian church. This is not to disregard the need to raise up male "soldiers" but simply the challenge to acknowledge the beauty where it is.

Since these events the door has continued to open in to this land and December 2001 saw another brief visit to teach the growing numbers of hungry missionary candidates.

Jet lagged and cramped after a long flight I found myself rushed onto another 5 hour bus trip to the countryside where eager students were awaiting. The bus filled with thick smoke as nicotine addicted men sucked greedily on their cigarettes, the droning engine noise interrupted only by a guttural chorus of phlegm filled spitting and coughing.

The cold night concealed our arrival and for seven days I was ‘hidden’ away in total cultural immersion with the Chinese students who became my ‘family’. It was so cold that I needed to sleep with all my clothes on. I had forgotten my sleeping bag but the students generously supplied me with a rather damp quilt.

"This belonged to one of the students who has since had to leave," they said.

The next morning, having survived a shivering night I dared to ask why the other student had left.

"Oh! He had a painful skin disease," they answered.

My damp quilt seemed all the more uninviting but it had been given with such generous abandon that I needed to don it with feigned satisfaction each night ! Sub zero temperatures with no heating and limited water supplies could not chill the warmth of fellowship as I poured out multiplied hours of teaching (translated faithfully into Mandarin and recorded onto innumerable cassettes) along with periods of prayer and counselling. The sheer hunger for God's word which emanated from the students was incredible. The morning began at 5am with two hours of prayer. Then an hour of worship together. Then noodles. Then four hours teaching. A pause for more noodles before another four hour session. Another final dose of noodles before an evening session and then bed ! Some of the students were young men of fifteen whose love and perseverance for the Lord were unflinching. Their passionate zeal more than made up for the Spartan conditions and long hours. One rusty bucket served as a toilet for over fifty people and night visits were to be practised by only the initiated !

One of the many highlights – apart from enjoying noodles and rice, was having the privilege of leading a Chinese man (the husband of one of our hosts) to the Lord. On a dirty floor covered in coal dust he knelt down as I led him in a prayer of repentance, and tears filling his eyes, he received Christ into his heart…Another member added to the sleeping giant that is the Chinese Church, stirring now and ready to send her thousands "Back to Jerusalem", along the old silk trade routes and Muslim/Buddhist strongholds to hasten the return of the King.