

# **The China Diary**

## **Swami Bodhananda**

(on His visit to China in September 2007)

### Part 1

The Dragon wants a make over to the Panda image on the eve of the Olympics in Beijing, 2008. Dragon is a fiery, fork-tongued, scale covered, bulge-eyed, crocodile like, and huge reptile. It is mythical and reminds of the extinct dinosaur. It moves like the thunderbolt the weapon of Indra, the Hindu king of gods. The exclusive symbol of Chinese emperors, dragon represents power. Chinese palaces install two dragons as gate keepers- one holding a ball, symbol of male-yang-power; the other caressing a cub, symbol of female-yin- loving care. Panda is an endangered animal, exclusively seen in China. They look a smaller version of black bears, with white strips around the neck and belly. The total population of Pandas is only three thousand and the Chinese government has patency rights over all Pandas in the world zoos. I visited a Panda sanctuary in Chengdu, south central China, in 200 hectares of bamboo reserve exclusively for Pandas. Pandas are voracious eaters (a telling symbol for the consumerist culture that China want develop). They eat ceaselessly and then fall asleep. They consume 40 KG of bamboo shoots in a day. But they digest only one third of what they gobble up and the rest is excreted. The Panda excreta have great medicinal value in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). They use it in beds and pillows, for curing headaches and joint pains. They are cute cuddly harmless carefree animals.

China wants to be like Pandas, not dragons and evoke fear in others. They no more talk about people's wars and nuclear attacks. They talk about getting rich fast, about cell phones, blue jeans, global trade, foreign exchange reserves, tourism, English language, high ways, toll roads, super power status, national pride, the inevitability of inequality, the rich and the poor, the lazy and the smart and finally the need for pragmatism, and the creation of a peaceful harmonious society.

China is one of the oldest unique living civilizations of the world along with India. But unlike India they had an uninterrupted imperial rule up to 1911 AD when Nationalist leader Sun Yat Sen overthrew the last Chin Emperor and established the first Chinese republic. The Mongols (Ghenghis Khan and Kublai Khan) and Manchus who ruled China got fully assimilated to Chinese culture and language. 93 percent of Chinese are the Han race (ref. Han Dynasty 206 BC to AD 211), small built feature less, hairless, lean people, who flourished in the Yangtze and yellow river valleys. China got its name from the Chin dynasty – 221-206 BC. They called their empire the Middle Kingdom (Zhong Quo). Chiang Kaishek who was over thrown by Mao Tse Thung whose communist party established the People's Republic of China in 1949 succeeded SunYat Sen.

I saw the boat shaped fortress gate of the Forbidden City, from the ramparts of which Chairman Mao proclaimed the new republic after trouncing the Nationalist forces. In front is the vast Tienenman Square, three times larger the Red Square in Moscow. It is here in 1985 the Chinese tanks mercilessly rolled over and mowed down protesting Chinese students who wanted democracy and installed a statue of Liberty. Li Pen was the Prime Minister and Theng Hiaso Ping the paramount leader of China at that time. On the south side of Tianenmen Square is Mao's Mausoleum, where the corpse of modern China's architect is kept embalmed. Russians started the practice by embalming Lenin; Vietnamese has kept Ho Chi Min's dead body and North Koreans that of Kim 1. I am sure Cubans will embalm Castro's body, thus continuing the superstitious practice of the Egyptians by atheistic communists. We in Goa have kept the corpse of the 16th century Franciscan saint Francis in his Church. I was disappointed that I couldn't see Mao's embalmed dead body, as the Mausoleum was not open. I did see Lenin's body lying in state in the Red Square in Moscow. On both sides of the Tianenmen Square are the House of Peoples' Congress (meets only in five year intervals to rubber stamp politbureau decisions) and the Beijing Opera House.

I reached Beijing 10.30 local time on 21 September 2007. After 12 hours flight from Los Angeles, three hours wait in Norita, Tokyo and another four hours flight to Beijing. I spend my flying time reading a book on Chinese culture and history. I prefer window seats for my flights and get to see a bird's eye pre-view of the city that I visit. Beijing from the sky looked non-descript. But the ground reality was totally different and mind-boggling. The airport was a swanky, marbled showpiece; but lacked finesse. Immigration and customs officials asked no questions and cleared me in a second. I had the same pleasant experience while leaving China from Shanghai. I was alone, (my party was to leave 8 hours later) and had two huge bags, but the young lady at the customs were so reverential that she helped me out of her way. Chinese instinctively respect saints and old people.

Chinese, like Indians, talk loud, crowd around and couldn't care for personal space. The airport lounge was full of people waiting to receive their friends and relatives. Out side it was like New Delhi International Airport, so so. The travel agent was there to receive me with his broken English, trained mannerisms and innocent, eager but phony hospitality. Chinese Universities give two-year courses in Tourism and related subjects and Spoken English. These trainees, mainly smart young women, know just enough history and local facts to satisfy the idle curiosity of tired tourists. They are prone to exaggerate and feed all the fads and notions of their customers. W had four male and five female tourist guides helping us in different cities. Male guides were sedate and eager to get work done, where female guides went out of their way to please us and exceptionally smart. Beijing was awash in smog. The van that took us to the Jade Palace Hotel on third ring road (Beijing has six ring roads encircling the city, where as Delhi has

only two and Bangalore just one) was dirty and jerky. The guide crooned a Korean love song.

There are certain things that are emblematic of China- the ancient Silk Route connecting old Chinese capital Xian to imperial Rome; the Jade road connecting Beijing to Tibet; the great wall built by the Ming Emperors in the 14th century. The Chinese discovered the gunpowder, the compass and printing. Chinese don't use gold, instead they wear jade-rings, bangles and pendants and rosaries. This is contrast to Indians who will die for gold; we are the biggest consumers of gold in the world.

We Akhilesh and me walked up the Great Wall north of China. It was difficult, the steps were three feet thick and I had to literally lift my foot with my hands. Mountains on three sides except on the south surround Beijing. The Great Wall came to its present gargantuan size (5000 KM) over many emperors' time. It was to keep the northern hordes away from the imperial capital. The Wall connects several mountains. I chanted the whole Bhagavad Gita (700 verses) sitting on the Wall. The Wall is one of the Seven Wonders of the World, but not as high as to be seen from the moon.

In Beijing we visited the Forbidden City, the seat of Imperial Power, the Emperor's Summer Palace and The Temple of Heaven, where the Emperor worshipped annually. The Forbidden City was inaccessible to commoners in the imperial times.

Common people were also not allowed to use the symbols of the emperor – the dragon, number 9 and color yellow. The forbidden city, spread in 72 hectares of land and surrounded by high walls and broad deep moats, is a cluster of places- all plain, square shaped, with boat roofs and painted in bright colours. The palace complex has 9999 rooms- again number 9, all painted yellow. The complex has no trees, because the Fengshui, the ancient Chinese concept of architecture, proscribes enclosing trees by buildings. Women were not allowed to be seen, their feet were put in iron castes from child hood to make the feet small and prevent women from running away. The emperor kept an army of eunuchs to keep watch on his harem of wives concubines and male lovers. But the queen was allowed to listen to conversations from behind a curtain and intervene and counsel the emperor when needed. Nobles of the city practiced the same custom. Water in huge brass jars (ancient China was very advanced in bronze casting) was kept at different points to douse fire catches the wooden structures) Another interesting tidbit of the imperial times was that the emperor had no voice in selecting his concubines. The queen selects them and she must have made sure that the ugliest ones were selected unless she herself had lesbian interests. Civil service examinations took place in the palace complex and topper was rewarded with plum job and matrimony with emperor's daughter. The present Chinese leaders don't stay here; they think that the city is jinxed.

The summer Palace (built during the Ming dynasty 1368-1644 AD) sits on an enormous man made lake. Behind on the north is a hill. This is according to the Fengshui tradition. The northern hill hinders the cold winds blowing from the Siberian Iceland's, and the lake keeps the habitat warm- a balance of yin and yang and the awakening of Che. The front building of the summer palace has in the courtyard statues of dragons, peacocks, roosters- representing power, peace and prosperity. The stone garden was exquisite. A particular type of stone, may be sand stone, is used in this art: they cut the sides to look it like a buxom lady for balance, then cut several holes in it for movement of energy, then carve wrinkles to make it look wise and then deposit the piece in the bottom of lakes. After fifteen years of curing they lift the stone, which become rounded and smooth implying harmony. These stone gardens are Chinese masterpieces. The summer palace has a very long winding corridor hugging the lake, perhaps for the emperor and his entourage to enjoy cool evenings. What is striking about the palace is its unobtrusive plainness and flow of spaces.

The Temple of Heaven, Peace and Harmony, where the emperor worshipped annually for rain and good harvest is an imposing but open structure – An enormous square wall enclosing a round platform. The square wall, which has 12 gates three on each side, represents earth and the round platform heaven- symbolizing the Universal Parents. The platform has stairs of nine steps on all four sides and a central altar for sacrificing animals, the altar ringed by nine concentric layers of stone tiles (note the recurrence of number nine). White and red bulls were sacrificed and then the meat was cooked in huge vessels, which will be shared among participants. Jade and wine were also used in worship.

There was another building to the east as you walk down. The main deity here is again Heaven- a tablet with calligraphy on the altar, nine steps leading to it. On both sides of the central altar there were nine other tablets each. Outside two buildings on both sides housing further tablets representing the Sun, the Moon and other planets. What come across these structures and altars are simplicity, openness and subtle suggestiveness. The temple gates had cloud embossing suggesting that Heaven is beyond the horizon. In the evening we went to visit a traditional Chinese street, "Hutong" some thing like an Indian 'galli' or 'Mohalla'.

I felt as though I was in Pahadganj, New Delhi. Narrow winding streets, houses with central courtyards; women, teens and old people living in separate segments; kitchens a mess of modern and old vessels and gadgets; old men patting round bellies and picking tooth idling on wooden benches; hungry dirty children playing in mud; dogs, pigs and chicken running helter-skelter; garbage heaped in street corners; young men speeding on motorbikes and two wheelers- it was like any third world over crowded city street, a century away from the Beijing I saw in the morning.

At the end of the day we saw a spectacular Kung Fu show presented by Kung Fu Martial Arts. The whole show was threaded around the story of a young boy reluctantly leaving his mother and coming to a master. He masters all the skills in record time, excels all, but falls in for arrogance and feminine temptations and loses his focus and the affection of the master, but later regrets, undergoes severe penances and discipline and regains his mastery and attention of the master, later enlightenment and the abbotship of the monastery. His training and later rigorous penances are the meat of the show. I kept my breath still during the entire show, my mouth open, my eyes wide and glued, my body stiff on its toes- I have never experienced in my entire life such magic and thrill: gliding through rings, somersaulting, climbing on ropes and bamboo poles, swinging from one pole to the other, juggling several hats, lying on the point of a sword- it was an amazing display of power, speed, stamina and physical mastery and mind control. I mentally saluted the real Chinese people.

**Friday, 2 Nov 2007 13:08:30**  
**Kalamazoo**

## **Part 2**

I thoroughly felt at home in China, though I did not understand a single word that they spoke. I liked tofu, eggplant, bitter melon, and with peanuts I could manage to stay well fed. My favorite Soya milk tasted bitter in China. Surprisingly, Chinese don't drink milk. I hardly saw any cow, buffalo or goat in China. The joke is that the 1.2 billion hungry Chinese have eaten up long back all that moves and breaths. They get their protein from Soya. India is the largest milk producer in the world (something to be proud of) and Indians love milk. The fat free protein could be the secret of the lean sturdy physique of the Chinese. Chinese do eat pickled snakes, frogs and moths. But I did not see them eating snakes in hotels. Pork is their staple meat. They put pork pieces in every thing and soups are invariably meat based. Chinese eat from small bowls using chopsticks. They mix every thing in the bowl, bring it close and pick pieces of vegetable or meat and rice with chopsticks and push into the mouth. Then sip the soup. Rice soup is popular. I also learnt to use chopstick and pick peanuts successfully.

The Chinese language is unique in comparison to the Semitic and Indo-European family of languages. It is highly nasal and the same word changes meaning as the tonal emphasis changes. Chinese language has no script as ours, the characters being clusters of pictorial representations. An average literate person masters 3000, while a scholar has mastery over 10,000 characters. I was told that all these characters are combinations of five types of strokes. The language is not phonetic and hence though the characters are the same spoken dialects vary from region to region- like Mandarin, Cantonese etc. Mandarin is the official language of China. It is the language spoken by

more people than even English and one of the five official languages of the UN. I could pick up only four words- 'Sheshe/thank you', 'Nihai/how are you', 'Maidan/bill', and 'Fo/enlightened'. It is impossible to travel in China with out a Chinese guide.

Travel in China is restricted unlike in India. Tourists are required to visit government emporiums and stalls. There they will swarm you and pester you to buy silk products, jade, jewelry, paintings, (we bought some pieces from an artist who paints with his mouth, he is born with out both hands, but is married to a beautiful wife) embroidery, ceramics, antiques, pearl and host of other items. We are not allowed to stray and talk to strangers nor will they answer inconvenient political questions.

All my questions about village poverty, the jobless and homeless, freedom, democracy, Tianenmen massacre, etc. were stone walled by our guide. Chinese TV is boring to watch and nothing in English. Chinese society is still hierarchical – men wield power and elders are respected and parents are revered. Burial grounds are considered sacred. Chinese believe that dead parents live in heaven and that they dead will join them. Atheist Mao consoled himself thinking that he will join Karl Marx, Frederick Angels Lenin and Stalin in Heaven. Such is the hold of ancestors in the Chinese imagination. Burial of dead parent is a solemn elaborate ritual. The Fengshui master will be consulted immediately after death to determine the time and place of burial. The master after consulting astrological calendars determines the proper time for burial. He also chooses the right place according to Fungshui principles. Fungshui is based on the dialectics of Yin and yang and energy of Che and the equilibrium of Ming. It also accepts the five elements as the foundation of the visible universe. The five elements are - Earth, Water, Fire, Wood and Metal. According to the Chinese these elements are independent principles/ energies/ vibrations constituting the subtle and gross worlds, including body and mind affecting health and ill heath. These five elements further groups into Yin and Yang and balance determine the appearance Che, the energy and the Ming the material outcome. Yin and Yang in their extremities morphs into each other and in their balance contains each other. The Fengshui master selects a burial place where Yin and Yang balances, like between a hill on the north and lake or pond in the south. The burial ceremony includes invoking the spirit of the dead parent on to a wood tablet which will be worshipped daily at home.

For the Chinese deceased parents in Heaven are gods. The Chinese are very artistic people. They love calligraphy and painting, write pithy ironic poems. They build their houses to synchronizing with the rhythm of the seasons- summer, autumn, inter and spring. The noble's house that we visited in Shanghai was built according to Fengshui, between water body and a hill and also to enjoy the season. The house was plain and open hugging the pond to reflect the beauty of seasons.

Xian – the old Charming city: We left Beijing by flight for city of Xian on 8th September, reaching about 12 AM and checked into Grand New World Hotel.

Xian is 700 miles south west of Beijing. The city is an hour's drive from the airport. It is a brand new facility, gleaming steel and glass structure. The four-line road drive to the city was traffic light free. The city of Xian on the yellow River, with a population of 8 million, was the capital of Imperial China for about 1200 years during the Chou (1112 to 221 BC), Chin (221 to 206 BC) and Han (206 BC to AD 221) dynasties. The present Chinese national and ethnic identities are known these dynasties. The capital was later moved to Nanjing and later to Beijing. The city of Xian is relatively sedate; six lane tree lined roads were deserted in the day, but became crowded by evening. After lunch we visited a 1200-year-old temple dedicated to Confucius. The temple built in the boat like style had a collection of 3000 tablets depicting Confucian teachings. On these stone manuscripts paper was pressed then ink was applied to make more copies. This practice was the genesis of printing press. These stone tablets could be any size between 2' x 3' to 5' x 7'.

After visiting the Confucian temple we watched a traditional Chinese music and dance program. Chinese theatres are very advanced in settings and lighting and very punctual. One young artist could excel in producing all kinds of bird sounds. The instruments used were- drums, cymbals, violin, variety of mouth organs, bells, flutes etc. The girl dancers wore extra long sleeves they could swing any which way creating an impression of birds of long plume in-flight, or bamboos swaying in wind or waves in ocean or clouds floating in the sky. The Terra Cotta museum was one-hour drive to the east of the city. Seven thousand soldiers, horses, chariots and other animals were dug out from an emperor's tomb. It was spectacular. Back in city we walked on the city wall, 8 km circumference, the only ancient city wall in the whole of China. The Ming Big Bell in the walled city center was another attraction. The 7 story Buddhist Wild Goose Pagoda, built in Indian style in 652 AD, established by Xuanzang (596-664 AD) who visited India and translated 1000 volumes of Buddhist literature into Chinese was elevating experience. His journey to India was immortalized and lampooned in Wu Chengen's novel ' Journey to the West' (Xi Yu Fi). Xuanzang's statue recently installed in front of the Pagoda shows a tall, hefty, moon faced, determined regal monk, holding a staff, with head shaven. Xian was exceptionally green, and gentle.

The Panda Land- Chengdu: One hour's flight from Xian, Chengdu is the capital of Siachuan province and the largest city in the bowl like valley of Siachuan. China is largely mountainous. Only 13 percent of the total land area is arable, compared to India's 53 percent. Land available for cultivation is the same in both India and China in spite of China being three times as large as India. The Indo-Gangetic plain is one of the largest and fertile real estate in the world comparable to the Mississippi Valley in America.

Chengdu was bigger and the airport was larger than Xian. 14 million people lived in the city and suburbs. Roads were wide, hedges lush green, tree lined avenues, clean side

walks and cycle lanes, highways with flyovers, fabulous lighting in buildings and street lights, and breathtaking greenery. The first thing we did was to visit the Panda sanctuary. There were fifty of them. After the Pandas we visited an ancient Dao temple, the Dao Tse Chin. The venerable sage Lao Tsu and other eight immortals are worshipped here. Incense and candles were burned as offerings. The deities were fearsome, with raised eyebrows, wild black beards and large protruding eyes. Daoism is a living practice, we saw some male and female monks engaged in serious discussion.

Leshan and Emei Shan: We drove out of Chengdu to Leshan, about two hours away. Leshan, a town of 2300 years of history, (though presently it looked every inch modern, one site read "city of Future") sits on the confluence of three rivers – Min Jiang, Chang Jiang, Qingyi Jian. It was raining and cold. It was our first drive along a highway cutting through villages. Houses were one-two story two room sets with courtyard. I was told most of the house holds raised pigs in their toilets, which were generally ten yards away from houses. Occasionally we could see old people sitting around in chairs. But no children playing, may be the result of one child policy. The fields were ill kept, and farming was not modernized. The most important sight in Leshan is the huge stone statue of Buddha (Da Fo) standing 300 feet high carved on the side of a mountain overlooking the river Min Jian. WE gazed at the peaceful statue straining our necks from a boat. It is amazing that the monks took all the trouble to carve this statue hanging precariously from the cliff. Power of Buddhist concentration, or is it faith? At Emei Shan we checked in Tian Fu Sunshine Hotel. It was cold and raining. The mountain ranges were spectacular. The following morning we went up the mountain to the Golden Buddha Summit- first three hours drive, then half an hour walk, then five minutes cable car. The three Buddha statues- Manjushree, Avalokitesvara and Sakya Muni seated on lotus surrounded by elephants on four directions on top of the pagoda and a standing Buddha inside was humongous. The cloudy mountain scenery around was fabulous.

We came back to Chengdu the same day.

**Saturday, 3 Nov 2007 19:50:04**  
**Kalamazoo**