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SNAKES BLOOD IN DATONG

A lesson in how to survive car journeys and joint ventures in China

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The saying goes that round every corner there is a surprise. This may seem true of driving in many countries but rural China makes that an understatement. You may need a cold beer after surviving some car journeys but only a snakes blood cocktail is fair reward for surviving a perilous car drive in rural China.

When living in Shanghai I was a regular visitor to the joint venture from hell where I was responsible for the birth control committee. This I hasten to add was not my only responsibility but it was certainly the most unusual. Thankfully this task could be delegated, as it was never clear to me whether my responsibilities were for the volume, size or quality of the end product.

This particular joint venture was not located in the wild east of capitalism that is typical of increasing numbers of cities in China. In contrast it was located in a military and party stronghold near to Inner Mongolia, in a city that was not use to receiving foreign visitors. On my first visit I was woken up at 2.30 am when the lights went on in my hotel room. I opened my eyes to find a policeman, an interpreter and the hotel manager looking down at me and insisting that I get out of bed to answer some questions. Driven by an impulsive urge not to cooperate with their infringement of my privacy [a traveling Englishman's hotel room is his castle] I refused. Reluctantly and to my surprise they did leave the room whilst I got dressed and then they returned to ask me why I was visiting their city. The fact that all this information had been provided to the Public Security Bureau before my arrival makes you wonder what their motives were. Perhaps they had been hoping to catch me abusing my birth control committee responsibilities.

On a subsequent visit I had my wallet stolen, which was enormously embarrassing for all involved as everybody lost face. Remarkably the wallet was found six months later after a raid on the thief's apartment. By this time I had relocated to Singapore but I was contacted via my company and I was asked whether I wanted the culprit to be executed, an offer which I declined. I do not know his fate but I got my stolen goods back, which restored my faith in the local police.

Despite, or perhaps because of, experiences like these, my involvement with joint ventures such as this was a highlight of working and living in China. It was a privilege to be working with and learning from the people who were coping with the dislocations and upheavals taking place in Chinese society and fundamentally changing peoples lives, whether they were willing participants or not. Despite the occasional traumas and stresses of being expatriates in China it is important remember that the life of

an expatriate was easy compared to the transitions and changes that the Chinese themselves were adapting to.

So where is the connection to the snakes blood cocktail?

Driving west from the city of the joint venture you eventually reach Datong in Shanxi Province, a place that is famous for two contrasting reasons. Located in Datong are the remarkable 5th century Yungang Buddhist caves and this area is also the source of the coal that fuels the power stations of Beijing. The Yungang Buddhist Caves were carved during the Northern Wei dynasty in the 5th century AD, when Danang was the capital of the dynasty and Buddhism was the state religion. The caves are a truly remarkable sight. The coal is an altogether different sight and it now powers a different religion.

To explore deeper into China I decided to visit Datong for the weekend. Together with a local driver I set off for what I expected to be a rural journey driving west to Datong. The drive was atrocious and there were many occasions when I expected never to return. A constant stream of heavily laden coal trucks headed eastward to the power stations. Loaded to bursting point with their coal the stoical and resourceful drivers attempted to negotiate the potholes and subsided sections of road and they had to fight to keep their trucks upright as they negotiated the obstacles. Despite the skills and strength of the drivers the trucks regularly collapsed with broken axles or lay dead, wheels in the air, after rolling down an embankment or sliding into a drainage ditch.

I suppose it is a truism to say that one person's problem is another person's opportunity. In Manila and Jakarta people play you music or sell you cigarettes when stopped at the lights. In London or New York they clean your windscreen. On this journey the coal scavengers appeared wherever the potholed road surface caused fragments of coal to be shaken off a passing truck. The coal fragments and dust, collected in rotting baskets by hunched and hungry people, is carried home for valuable fuel on the fire. It is on journeys such as this that you are starkly reminded of how conditions in cities such as Beijing and Shanghai are so untypical of rural China. The poverty is extreme and the living conditions desperate.

However, our journey was only just beginning. Under the weight of the trucks a bridge had collapsed. Massive traffic jams formed and it was impossible to see how we could possibly reach Datong, or return home, without spending at least one night in freezing conditions in the car. Thankfully, the driver had different ideas and he pointed the V.W. Santana down the embankment and towards the fields. We drove down farm tracks, across fields, along dried up riverbeds and through an orchard. We then had to rescue the car from sinking in a newly ploughed field that we attempted to drive across. After about an hour of driving in conditions that I would have not expected a Land Rover to find easy we finally returned to the road, having bypassed the broken bridge. Both driver and car, a Shanghai built V.W. Santana, had certainly surpassed my expectations.

That night we celebrated our safe arrival in Datong with a glass of the not yet famous Datong snakes blood cocktail [equal measures of snakes blood and Maotai]. We then progressed onto the even less famous Datong snakes bile cocktail [equal measures of bright green bile and Maotai]. You may be squeamish about such concoctions but they are a lot more desirable than a freezing night in a V.W. Santana surrounded by coal trucks.

The following morning we left Datong before sunrise, as we had to drive to Beijing for me to catch a flight home to Shanghai. A non-stop ten-hour drive if we were lucky. It did not take long to reach the traffic jam of the previous day. The truck drivers were crouched around the fires they had lit to keep warm through the night. We retraced our route through the orchard, riverbeds and fields – avoiding the newly ploughed sections – and once again were able to bypass the broken bridge. Later in the day we hit another traffic jam on a dual carriageway section that I expected to finally defeat us.

However, this time we followed a police car for ten kilometers through the middle of two lines of stationary trucks. When the police finally got annoyed with being tailed they stopped and angrily approached our car. Surprisingly they let us continue without even a fine....a privilege no doubt of having a foreigner in the car. We made it to Beijing airport after a twelve-hour drive. How the driver managed it I will never know. Perhaps the snake blood had given him special powers, a thought I reflected on as I flew back to my wife in Shanghai.

Invigorated by my new learning about the special powers of snakes blood I offered that night to surpass my wife's expectations. This was rebutted with some crazy western logic about it being she, not me, who needed the aphrodisiac. Oh well, coitus interruptus but a good lesson in birth control for my next visit to the joint venture.

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