

**98TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BATTLE OF AMIENS:
FIRST VISIT TO CHINA
SPEECH BY HER EXCELLENCY PROFESSOR THE HONOURABLE
KATE WARNER AM, GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
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In my remarks today I plan to discuss our visit to China last month to attend a graduation ceremony at the Ocean University of Shanghai followed by visits to Beijing, Xi'an and Pingyao. I will discuss our impressions of China supplemented by insights gained from Dick's cousin Shelley Warner who has run a business in Beijing for more than twenty years; and journalist John Pomfret's book, *Chinese Lessons*,¹ which we read during our visit. First, I should introduce Shelley Warner and John Pomfret.

Shelley was a junior diplomat with the Australian Embassy when it opened in Peking in January 1973 just after the Whitlam Government had recognised the PRC (the People's Republic of China) as the official Chinese Government. Her husband, Tony Voutas, arrived in China the following year. After various postings, Shelley returned as a senior diplomat in 1986 and since 1991 she and Tony have lived in Beijing running a consulting business, and they brought up their two children, Sam and X'ian in Beijing.

Shelley advised us to use Wild China as our Chinese travel agent and waiting for us with our itinerary and tickets when we arrived in Beijing was John Pomfret's book, *Chinese Lessons: Five Classmates and the story of the New China*. Pomfret was a 22 year-old exchange student at Nanjing University (Nanda) in 1981, at a time when American students were allowed back into China after the Cultural Revolution. Universities had started readmitting students in 1977 when entrance exams were reinstated. (Mao Zedong died in 1976).

Twenty years later Pomfret returned to China and immersed himself in the lives of five of his former classmates and the book tells their stories, tracing their lives from childhood during the Great Leap Forward (1958-61) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) to a decade ago. The book ends with John meeting Mei, his future wife, a Harvard Business School graduate and founder of Wild China.

¹ J Pomfret, *Chinese Lessons: Five Classmates and the story of the New China*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 2006.

Late on Wednesday 6 July we arrived in Shanghai so we could attend the annual graduation ceremony at the Shanghai Ocean University, where students can take a SOU degree and a University of Tasmania degree in Business or Information Systems. The following day (Thursday) we went with the University contingent including the Chancellor, Michael Field; the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of International Relations; Deputy Chair of Academic Senate; the Dean of Science, Brian Yates and the Dean of Business, support staff and others for a 'meet and greet' at the Shanghai Ocean University followed by the President's lunch.

The first surprise was how far Shanghai Ocean University is from the City Centre where we were all staying. Shanghai, with a population of 24 million, is the most populous city in the world. It is an ultra-modern city dominated by numerous quite stunning skyscrapers with elevated roads and expressways overlooking the city below. The University was some two hours' drive away, well into the countryside, and in an area of largely reclaimed land which is the site of some eight universities, all in newly constructed buildings. They are the seed population for nearby Lingang New City (or Nanhui New City) as it is now called, which is a new planned city aiming to house 800,000 residents by 2020. At present it is largely a ghost town housing a few thousand students and their bicycles. Other residents have been reluctant to move there but they probably eventually will – meantime hundreds of buildings are vacant. We heard talk of official corruption being a possible reason for the stalling of the occupation of the new city; and it has been reported that a number of officials from the Land Management Bureau of Nanhui District have been investigated for corruption. When our VC went to his first graduation ceremony at the Lingang campus, the driver got lost on the new road system and they ended up in a capsicum patch almost missing the ceremony.

The meet and greet with the President, Vice-President and senior staff was a very formal affair with speeches about how honoured they were to have us, how wonderful the Ocean University was, how they hope to collaborate with the University of Tasmania more, particularly in marine science and with IMAS and how they were commissioning a new and large research vessel which would have the capacity to travel to the Arctic and the Antarctic.

We then responded: how pleased we were to be here; how clever their students were; how interesting to hear about their research vessel and I said how we were looking forward to welcoming their scientists in Hobart when

their research vessel was in port. The conversation took a long time because only one person could speak at once and each sentence or two had to be translated – although this does have the advantage of giving the speaker plenty of time to think about the next sentence!

The graduation ceremony was the following day, thankfully in the morning, as it was extremely hot and humid and the building did not have much in the way of air conditioning. Some three hundred students graduated in traditional gown, hood and tasselled mortar-board, which they had enormous difficulty in keeping in place. Around 80% of the graduates were women and women claimed all the prizes.

Dick and I both survived rather traumatising visits to the ‘washroom’. For me, dressed in my long gown, hood and cap and with no place to hang my bag, the paperless squat toilet was a challenge to the strength of my thighs and calves. Pomfret tells me that the Achilles tendons of the average Westerner are much less flexible than the average Chinese, partly explaining my fear of squatting.² And Dick, being taller than most Chinese men, banged his head on jutting pipe and was drenched in water and emerged rather wet just before the ceremony. It could have been worse!

In the evening we attended a banquet held by SOU for about 20 or so guests. Apparently the graduation banquet has been drastically reduced in scale this year as President Xi Jinping’s crackdown on official extravagance bites. Nevertheless there were countless courses and plenty of alcohol. The equivalent of the SOU Dean of Science was a very jolly fellow who loved challenging everyone (including me) to scull their drink, with the cry *gan bei* or bottoms-up!

Our official duties over, Dick and I took the fast train to Beijing the following day, where we were met at the station by Shelley and Tony and a driver and taken to our hotel, the wonderful Opposite House on Sanlitun Road, in the diplomatic district and just outside the inner city.

When Shelley arrived in Peking in 1973, it was a very different city. The blue skies were clear of pollution, cars were a rarity and instead there were trolley buses, donkey drawn carts and thousands of bicycles. Everyone dressed in blue, khaki or grey clothing; very small children being the only exception. The year 1973 was still during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The population

² Pomfret, n 146.

has since grown from 4 to 20 million. Western dress is universal, denim in all its manifestations ubiquitous and Uniqlo, GAP, H&M, Zara as well as luxury brands like Chanel have shops as in any big city.

Rather than focusing on the tourist sites of Beijing, the Great Wall at Jinshanling and the Muslim quarter of X'ian, I will concentrate more on the things we did with Shelley and Tony. So fast forward from a visit to the Forbidden City to meeting Shelley and Tony outside the Northern Gate of the Forbidden City and going with them to Jingshan Park opposite the Gate. It was a welcome and shady oasis after the largely treeless Forbidden City. There were many groups of middle-aged to older Chinese men and women singing in open-sided pavilions in the park – Shelley explained they would have been people who had been forced during the Cultural Revolution to leave their comfortable life in the city to go into the countryside to do manual work with the peasants. They get together in weekends and on holidays in the parks to sing revolutionary songs and socialise.

Shelley and Tony then took us on the first of a number walking tours to see the remnants of the old Beijing, the hutongs or lanes with their one (and occasionally two-storey) courtyard houses and tiny shops. These have been largely demolished and the people rehoused in large apartment blocks but for the moment, at least, some remain.

They explained that as Beijing grew many more people have been crammed into these courtyard houses and more rooms built to accommodate them – you can count the number of families living in a courtyard by the number of electricity metres in the alleyway. The dwellings in the courtyard houses are generally not individually sewered but there are communal toilets in the lanes. Shelley pointed out where the statues of lions at the entrance to courtyards and roof ornamentation had been smashed during the Cultural Revolution.

Pomfret's classmates all had their own story of the Cultural Revolution. Book-idiot Zhou, the son of a peasant and a borrowed-belly (when his wife could not have children, Zhou's father brought another woman to live in the house to bear his children). At the age of 11, at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, Zhou joined the Red Guard and as the youngest member of a small gang he went around smashing Buddhist temples, forcing monks to walk around with boulders on their backs and garbage cans on their heads, searching houses for counterrevolutionary contraband, books, jewelry, good clothes and so on. He told John how his gang beat an old man accused of once been a landlord, and

fearing torture the old man killed himself. As a young boy Zhou also publicly denounced his birth mother. Denouncing parents and family was encouraged by Mao who strived to create a single allegiance, to the Communist Party and to Mao. It was gangs like these that smashed the bourgeois ornamentation from temples and other buildings, including courtyard houses.

On our walk, Shelley pointed out the courtyard house where Mao lived at one stage with his wife's family. We wandered down lanes which focused on a particular specialty, food, gifts and tailoring, sometimes with signs in English. 'Change your clothes' had me stumped at first but clearly it meant 'alterations'. Crickets in tiny wicker or wire cages were one of the more unusual items in gift shops.

Shelley showed us examples of the typical old two-lane tree-lined streets that are fast disappearing and she pointed out a man taking his bird for a walk in a covered cage, swinging the cage quite firmly to exercise the birds' legs. The story of birds in China is an interesting one. In 1958, during the Great Leap Forward, a campaign against pests was introduced as a hygiene measure and the population was ordered to eradicate birds, especially sparrows. By the 1960s there were no sparrows and few other birds and the insect population exploded. Mosquitoes, locusts and other crop-eating insects decimated crops, exacerbating famine. In the cities too the lack of birds caused flies and mosquito numbers to boom and so families were issued with a quota of insects to kill.

Dogs too were banned at one stage in Beijing and then limited numbers were allowed, subject to a licence. Owning a dog became a status symbol and entrepreneurial Chinese would stand outside parks with dogs to rent to allow those who wished to be seen in the park walking a dog.

We went of course to Tiananmen and had a drink in a classy restaurant overlooking the Square called Capital M, owned by an Australian, Michelle Garnaut. Tiananmen Square brought back vivid memories of the massacre of 4 June 1989, when student demonstrators trying to block the advance of the military to the Square were killed by soldiers with assault rifles and run over by tanks. John Pomfret was there; he had been sent to cover the student uprising and demands for democracy for Associate Press. He was deported after the massacre. Shelley was also visiting China at the time (to the consternation of her family) and had left Beijing for Shanghai the day before.

Shelley also took us to the Red Gate Art Gallery, in the only remaining tower in the old city wall. The Gallery is run by an Australian who showed us around and explained some of the pieces in the exhibition, which was showcasing his own personal collection.

I spent my birthday visiting the Terracotta Warriors, the underground army made more than 2000 years ago to protect Emperor Qin (chin spelt QIN as our guide Helen helpfully explained) in the afterlife. As you may be aware, the Warriors were only discovered in 1974, by a farmer digging a well. When Shelley and Tony first visited the site with their son Sam, there were only three Warriors on display in a tin shed. Sam, who was a toddler, leant against it, causing it to topple precariously. Today in the first of three pits there are some 2000 soldiers on display, and many more remain uncovered. Today it not possible to stand beside, let alone touch the Warriors.

We spent the weekend in Pingyao with Shelley and Tony, where we stayed in a charmingly restored courtyard house hotel called Jing's Residence. Pingyao is a UNESCO listed heritage city, which in contrast to Beijing, Shanghai and X'ian has no high-rise building inside the city wall. We spent the day walking the wall and visiting museums and on Sunday morning we had an interesting tour of three courtyard houses: the first where a farming family lived; the second a silversmith and his family; the third an old dilapidated courtyard house which the owner of our hotel had bought with a view to renovation for another hotel. The authorities are trying to move the people out of the old city to make way for more tourist development. Much of this city is not connected to a sewerage system and so donkey drawn poo carts are a common sight and smell throughout the day in the city streets. Traditionally night-soil was used as a fertiliser in China and still is in some regions, although by the 1980s chemical fertilisers were replacing night-soil.

In 1987, Pomfret's classmate, Book-idiot Zhou, by then no longer a student of course but a poorly-paid history teacher, established a business on the side which collected urine from public toilet facilities and took it to a plant where the enzymes were extracted for pharmaceutical purposes. By 1987 going into business was no longer frowned upon as China ditched its 'we're-all-poor-together egalitarianism' upon which communism was based in favour of a quest for cash and allowing the entrepreneurial genius of the Chinese people to flourish again.³

³ Pomfret, n 144-145.

In closing I will just mention, three other things which were striking: Almost no one has grey hair, not even streaks of grey hair apart from the occasional very, very old person. I thought this must be genetic, but no – they all dye their hair until they retire.

There are no old cars, at least in the big cities. Shelley and Tony don't have a car. They have been on the waiting list for a permit to have one for about four years, permits which are allocated by a lottery system. Their old car died after Beijing banned leaded petrol in 1998 and overnight leaded petrol was unavailable.

And finally: people wanted to take our photo. Maybe it was the grey hair!