

A Small Railway Bazaar

Shanghai to Hangzhou, August 10, 1985

The 2.19 p.m. train left at a clanking crawl in a thunderstorm at 2.18. There was nothing too delicate or streamlined about this huge, green, workman-like iron horse until I entered the “Foreigners-only” special-class carriage – air-conditioned, grey-velour curtained, old-world comfortable and sealed off from the other steerage-class carriages. Nothing like the sleek efficiency of trains in Tokyo where we lived and worked.

Tables were set with embroidered cloths and lidded cups containing steaming hot green tea. Our smug security complete, we turned to the slow-passing ramshackle houses of suburban Shanghai. In size they compared well to anything in Tokyo; in every other respect, they made Tokyo look like Beverly Hills or Belgravia. One row of “houses” was a set of railway carriages shunted out of the way, the occupants perhaps steam-age travellers or honourable train-spotters.

The soft seats, the frilly curtains, the green tea contrasted badly. I got closer to the undulating dilapidated roofs and walls on both sides of the train by going to a dirty, hot, cage-like space between carriages – this provided more of a feeling of oneness with the railway dwellers, as we passed through the centre of their lives. I shared the “cage” with a big old kettle, its leaking corked spout gurgling hot water with every rock of the train.

In this fashion, we cleared Shanghai in 50 minutes and my conscience allowed me to return to leg-room and opulence. Now it was open country. One field had hundreds of coolie-hatted planters all bent double to the task of growing food for their “county” – good crops of potatoes, corn and cabbage. Irrigation channels were extensive and well made. Small tidy farms had ponds with ducks, fawn and plump. Suddenly from a muddy river surface, a conical straw hat rose up and a naked, weed clearer appeared. There must have been a lot of these workers, as much of the land was watery channels and ditches.

Nearing Hangzhou, at the first and only stop, I was a source of amusement for a group of singledotted railway workers hanging over their bath-house balcony.

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All were laughing, joking and pointing, but in a friendly way. I was glad I was standing in my cage with the window down and not sitting posh and distant behind curtains.

On the platform, a wire cart passed, pushed by a rice seller, shrilly offering “Jong Tsee”, seaweed-green pyramids of heavy glutinous rice wrapped in bamboo leaves. Ten Yuan later, I was surrounded by our Hong Kong and Japanese “soft-class” companions all advising on what exactly was inside my mysterious pyramid. One happy, smiling, Buddha-like businessman from HK said that you go mad if you eat too much of it. So everybody had a toothpickful of the hot, sticky, tasty, rice flavoured with chunks of pumpkin.

As we pulled into the misty, lake city of Hangzhou, we mused that a similar journey on other sides of the world might be Edinburgh to Inverness on “The Highlander”, or Auckland to Wellington on “The Silver Fern”. Train travel begets train memories, the luxury of which was abruptly stopped for us as we exited in a steamy crush of peasants carrying caged chickens. The comfortable special class travellers had missed the soft-class lounge exit.