

Immaculate Mandarins

I've been a student for three years and the money is all spent. It lasted a lot longer than I thought it would, but now, as the Chinese might say, I've eaten the mountain empty and now my wok is turned bottom up. During the summer in Xin Jiang I started to look on the internet for jobs and contacted some friends in the Language University.

As luck would have it when I returned to Beijing the Language University were looking for people to teach courses which had been postponed by SARS. I worked for a month with very civilized colleagues and delightful well-motivated students, teaching mature students who planned to go abroad. Many of them were certainly much more qualified in their fields than I am or ever will be in any field, and I felt very honoured to be able to work in the university where I myself learned Chinese. I decided to plan to return to the UK and visit family and friends with the aim of coming back in September and looking for a year's contract. But then somewhat unexpectedly I got offered a job acting in a TV serial. I had already spoken to the director and his assistant about this thing, they had a look at me, talked a bit of Chinese with me and told me not to shave or get a haircut in the next wee while. I had no great expectation of any result. But surprisingly they offered me a three month contract to make a television film. I was taken to a hotel where the film crew had taken over a whole floor for pre-production. There were rooms full of Qing Dynasty costumes, rooms full of scripts and rooms where competent looking personnel busied themselves with scissors needle and thread. There was a room full of ownerless haircuts and lipless beards in boxes. Everywhere was a bustle and a feeling of excitement and anticipation. The assistant said I looked like a nice law-abiding fellow and asked me if I could play a villain. I said I could. He said I had to play someone called "Hede". This "Hede" actually existed and his name was very familiar to some of my friends but nobody could tell me anything about him, least of all that most important piece of information, what actually was his English name!

Before I go on with this saga I have to explain about the TV play in China. The TV play in China is not your Tuesday Night Theatre production, thirty seven minutes if you don't count the ads. A TV play in China is at the very least 20 episodes of 45 minutes each, and most commonly 40 episodes. They tend to run on consecutive evenings rather than once or twice a week, and they are published on VCD or in the case of a few outstanding series on DVD format. Chinese viewers love them. They must love them because in any town in China you can go into any one of a dozen CD shops and see these video sets piled high on the shelves. I suspect at least as many people watch them on disk as on TV because as you can imagine, to watch a 40 part TV serial without missing an episode is not feasible for most people. This stuff is produced fantastically quickly. A 40 part serial is filmed in three and a half months, that's 30 hours of TV in three and a half months, the equivalent of making two feature films a week for three and a half months. Naturally the productions standards don't match a feature film, for instance in my favourite serial "Da Zhai Men" ("The door of the big house"), there are a lot of scenes which look quite amateurish and you know that they could easily have done several more takes had time permitted. These slips are usually not in the expression of the script, but in scenes using children or sometimes fight scenes. So the effect is somewhere between film

and theatre, it's more like filmed theatre than actual film. And you forgive the imperfections because you love the endeavour and you have suspended your disbelief.

There are hundreds of these lengthy TV serials, quite possible thousands. They vary from extreme whimsy (fire hurling magicians, metamorphosing unicorns, merciful faeries & c) through some extremely good theatre up to "Da Zhai Men" which seems to me to be a world-class masterpiece (albeit one that could never be appreciated by an audience outside China). I quite recently watched several episodes of a serial drama called "Extraordinary Citizen" about the last emperor Pu Yi, covering much of the same ground as Bertolucci's film. A lot of it reminded me of the Bertolucci. When I have time and money I will buy it and watch it all through. I've been interested in these serial dramas ever since I came to China and I've watched three all the way through and large parts of many others. I often hear people say there's no decent art in China, but I think these serials are a very vital form of art, albeit tending to the popular. Certainly far more vital than, say, TV quiz shows or hang out your dirty linen shows. And there are some really superb actors in China, some of the acting in Da Zhai Men is unbelievably good.

So, I felt very interested in the idea of playing in a drama myself. The drama I was hired to play in is about the first governor of Taiwan, General Liu Ming Chuan. He successfully defended Taiwan against a French invasion in 1884, and was appointed Taiwan's first governor. When I went to the dress department to try on my clothes I was told the filming would start in two weeks and was given a copy of the first seven episodes of the script. They said the rest hadn't been written yet, so I was left with only two scenes with which to puzzle out this character "Hede". I looked on the Internet and found nothing of substance. I couldn't work out from the script what kind of villain he might be, perhaps I should ask the director. After all, a villain can be rumbustious and larger than life, or a miserly hand-wringing ledger bender, or violent or diseased or sickening. What sort of villain was "Hede"? Fortunately somewhere along the line at the third time of trying I managed to put an English name to "Hede". This was in fact the Chinese name for Sir Robert Hart.

This was a good turn of events because Sir Robert is a very interesting character and in my view very far from being a villain. He went up to Queen's College Belfast at the age of 16 and in 1854 at the age of 19 was sent on government service to China where he stayed for the rest of his active life. (His official journals, now in Queen's College, run to seventy volumes). At the age of 26 he was put in charge of the customs service and the management of import duty. He thoroughly overhauled the customs service, abolished several pre-existing levels of bribery and corruption, and also oversaw the establishment of lightships and lighthouses in China's great ports. He was fiercely anti corruption and foreign staff who showed anti Chinese prejudice were instantly dismissed. He regarded himself as a servant of the Chinese government and took part in many negotiations between foreign powers and the Qing court. In 1885 he negotiated between the Chinese and the British in a dispute involving Burma, and in 1884 he was involved in negotiations with the French, which is where I come in.

Having discovered this, I wondered why they should regard Hart as a villain. As it happened I had plenty of time to think about it because they kept me waiting for almost 2 weeks before they called me to go to Dalian and start filming this thing. I had in the course of my research discovered some pictures of Hart which I took to show the director. At lunch on the first day I tapped him on the shoulder and asked him if he'd

seen any pictures. I expected him to be completely uninterested and to have already fixed his ideas but not at all, he immediately sent two makeup girls to my room to shave the top of my head so now I have a bald pate and whiskers and look very much like the bard himself.

The next day the filming started in a rather old fashioned hotel in Dalian. The props ladies had my clothes but a dressing room? Don't even think about it. I don't suppose I am the first person to take my trousers off in the corridor of the Grand Hotel Dalian but it still didn't feel comfortable somehow. The first scene I had to play was in a small room with two absolutely immaculate Qing Dynasty officials in blue silk gowns with red lampshade hats. They were furiously cribbing their lines off scraps of paper. The director asked me if I was speaking English or Chinese and I told him Chinese. Ok, ready, camera, action! One of the immaculate mandarins sat on his lines and the other one stuffed his lines under his hat. I had to tell them I can't do anything, the French have lost patience and General Courbet's battleship has already arrived in JiLong. They ask for an extension, I tell them I have to go back to Tianjin and wish them good day, we make formal salutes to each other. I walk out of the room or in any case past the camera, one of the mandarins expresses the view that he hopes he'll never have to see a foreigner's ugly face again (I later discovered this to be an accurate representation of his feelings towards foreign actors). It was quite magical. There were a couple of different camera angles to do but it was all over quite quickly. Then I had to do another scene where I was sitting across a table from a man who looked like a perfect French diplomat. European face, curly hair, plump and menacing. He had to tell me his price had just gone up from 40,000 to 100,000 silver splonders because General Courbet's battleship would be in JiLong tomorrow morning. I felt really threatened. What had I done to this guy? I didn't know him from Adam, why did he hate me? But of course it was all in the script. Immaculately memorized, flawlessly delivered, I was green with envy. Later I asked him where he's from and he said he actually is Chinese, he just had a French father, which made me feel a little better.

There's quite a demand for foreign actors for these TV plays, and because they could never afford to actually import a real foreign actor (except maybe for a really major part) they tend to use anyone who comes to hand; as long as you have the right kind of looks and can speak a bit of Chinese you'll do. And as for middle-aged actors they are even scarcer than young and glamorous actors since there are plenty of foreign students but most people of my age or so have what's known as a meaningful profession. Actually the requirement to speak Chinese is mainly so one can take direction and read the script, the lines don't matter too much since most of the films are dubbed anyway. I recall one project where a German lady gave up on the Chinese entirely and just said "Merry Christmas" an appropriate number of times. But I try and learn the lines properly for two reasons. One is that it benefits my Chinese, and the other is that if the lines are delivered properly it helps the characterization which in my case needs all the help it can get since I otherwise don't have a clue about acting. A tertiary consideration is that although badly spoken or fluffed lines may not be evident in the finished product, if the immaculate mandarins clutch their sides and start rocking back and forth the lampshade hats fall off which is a definite retake and an annoyance for all concerned.

Performing Hart with a group of Chinese actors for a potential audience that will probably exceed the gross population of the British Isles is an exceedingly odd

experience. Firstly I feel infinitely honoured to have been given the chance and at the same time it feels like an immense responsibility. When I perform I feel as though I am Hart's barrister, representing him in court against the charge that he was a profiteer and a minion of the despicable eight power army, which he wasn't. He was stuck somewhere between the British (who viewed China mainly as an excellent market for opium), the vile late Qing court of the Empress Dowager Cixi (who was embezzling money from her own navy to build a pleasure garden even as the French navy were steaming towards Taiwan), with the poor ordinary citizen of China being trampled somewhere down below. He wasn't a policy maker but a diplomat and as a diplomat he understood the horrors of war and strove to avert them wherever possible. But it's not surprising that the Chinese should view a British man arriving in China between the opium wars and the burning of Yuan Ming Yuan as a villain. I felt when I was filming those three scenes in Dalian as though reality (whatever that is) and fiction had completely intercrossed. After all, theatre involves catharsis, the playing out of unresolved emotions and the licking of wounds in the collective unconscious. The pressures are there inside us, and when they are played out before a camera containing a million eyes some kind of transformation takes place which I had not expected and was not prepared for. In this theatre it's us, the white man, who is the villain. I finally understand what an American Indian actor must feel like when they hand him a script that just says, "fall off your horse". Foreign actors in Chinese drama are almost invariably villains or drug dealers or fat men or soldiers. And they sure as hell never get the girl.

I've never in my life had an ambition to be an actor and I don't now really, except that if I'm going to do it I'd like to do it as well as I can. But it's a nice job because it will help my Chinese enormously, everyone on the set speaks Chinese and there are a lot of people who have received higher education and what's more are enthusiastic about what they are doing so the opportunities for practice are excellent. Also not many of them speak English, presumably because they like their jobs and aren't planning to emigrate. The actors are treated quite respectfully by the film crew, all practical problems like travel transport and meals are handled for them, and the actor is addressed as "laoshi" (literally "old being") which is normally used to mean teacher. The film crew is a troupe really, rather like a bunch of strolling players. After we finished in Dalian the equipment was loaded into two trucks to be driven to Beijing and the actors were put on a train. I shared a compartment with the dignified Russian gentleman who plays General Courbet. Also two Chinese women were in the compartment with us. One of their husbands put his head round the door and was thoroughly appalled. "You can't sleep here", he said, "Those are foreigners". His wife ridiculed his concern. "Don't be ridiculous. Look how fat he is, he'll never climb up onto the top bunk".

Somewhere after starting the filming for Liu Ming Chuan I got taken to an interview for a part in another series. My agent drove me about an hour into the suburbs of Beijing to what looked like an old aerodrome which was being used as a flower nursery. We drove into an absolutely massive aircraft hangar in the centre of which was an extraordinary wooden building with meticulously carved panels. I met a director and had an interview, my bald pate was proudly displayed and so on. It seemed my height was a critical factor and they asked me how tall I am, which I don't know because I still only know it in feet and inches. They looked around for something to measure me with

and produced a charming young woman who they stood up against me and pronounced me just the right size. “Are you my daughter”, I asked her, “No, your wife”, she said and fled back into the bowels of the aircraft hangar. I didn’t think much more about it really, but about 2 weeks ago while I was sitting in the flat feeling wretched because Liu Ming Chuan still hadn’t got round to my scenes again and I had no money and was reduced to eating tofu and eggplants I got a call suddenly to go down to Shanghai on the morrow, ticket paid, to film this other thing. The other thing is a 40 part play which has been written and is being directed by an eminent young actor called Huang Lei. The make up girls are much more finicky than Liu Ming Chuan and not only shaved my head but put something like nail varnish on it and patted it all over with pink talcum and God knows what else till I looked like a humanoid in Star Trek. In the aircraft hangar I had got the impression that the lady I was being measured for was a Polish girl and a student like myself, picked to play a bit part (or as the Chinese say “run in a dragon suit”) on account of being the right shape and having a smattering of the lingo. But now I discover that she is in fact an eminent Chinese starlet and the leading lady of the piece. She plays a half Chinese half Polish Jew coming back to China after going abroad and marrying an older Polish Jewish businessman (that’s me) and about to make contact again with her own true love who has believed her for some time to be dead. And don’t worry if you didn’t get all that, I’m still working on it too. Miss Ma turned up quite late on the evening of the day I arrived, and I was trying on my various outfits at the same time as she was having her preliminary hair curling ops. I have a suit, a set of casual wear and a pair of pyjamas. The suit and the casual wear seemed to go down okay, but when I came out of the bathroom wearing the pyjamas Miss Ma promptly informed her dresser she would be wearing TWO layers of underwear under her nightdress on the morrow. Miss Ma is the most immaculate Mandarin I have ever seen. She has an army of dressers, hairdressers, eyebrow pluckers and powder puff patters. Her naturally straight hair has to be curled for this piece. As the play is set about 1937 – 45 there is a distinctly art deco feel about the costumes and the makeup, I think it will be visually much more beautiful than many of the silly historical dramas with their soldier suits and lampshade hats. I am a Polish Jewish businessman coming to China to do some business in Ningbo. There are a group of us and Miss Ma, apart from being my wife, poor lady, is also the interpreter for the group so obviously we can’t speak Chinese. The script calls for Polish but neither I, Miss Ma, nor anyone else on the film knows Polish or knows anyone who does, so I had to translate large chunks of the script into English which from the point of view of the language was not hard, just that as we got towards the end “Let me come with you to China and look after you for the rest of your life, I love you”, “Oh Joseph, you’re such a nice man, but ... there’s someone in China I have to see” and so on the feelings were just dynamite, I wanted to take two weeks over it, to try the feelings, get the tone, but I had twenty minutes. Not that I suppose anyone will notice because neither the actors nor most of the audience will really understand what’s being said, they’ll be looking at the subtitles. But it was only at this point when I suggested that they let the Chinese actors speak their lines in Chinese, that they informed me that the film was not being dubbed, that our voices were being recorded directly onto the tape. Help!

The first day I filmed three scenes with Miss Ma in a hotel near the river called the Actor’s Hotel because it’s a favourite place for making films and TV plays. It’s an old building with lovely wooden floors and some beautiful carved period furniture. In the

corridor hang photos of Bertrand Russell and Albert Einstein, both of whom stayed there. The scenes all took place in a bedroom, I had to come out of the bathroom in my clothes and wish Miss Ma who was standing by the window in her nightgown good morning and kiss her on the shoulder, I had to tell her she didn't sleep well and ask her if she wasn't feeling well. At some point she had to adjust my tie and send me downstairs. Then there was another scene where I was in my pyjamas and Miss Ma was in her nightgown and she had to sit on the bed and I had to put my arm around her and tell her I love her. We had only ever spoken two sentences to each other in our entire lives, so the effect of this, naturally, was to cause the top of my head to split open and the unfortunate Miss Ma's hair to stand on end and her eyelashes to fall out which meant armies of dressers and hairdressers for Miss Ma, and the application of liberal amounts of powder to my bald pate between each take. Eventually they seemed happy and I got to ride back to the hotel in Miss Ma's Jeep. She turned out to be a nice girl as far as I could see and asked me lots of questions about English.

I hung around in Shanghai and visited a friend and then went back to the film and hung around for three days waiting for my turn to come around again. Then I just had to do one more scene, to sit around a table with Miss Ma and four male Chinese actors, I had one line to speak but they cut it. I went back to the hotel with three of the actors and they whisked me off into a restaurant and got out the "bai jiu" (Chinese "white wine", totally lethal). The next day I had to go back to Beijing but the train didn't leave till 6 pm so I was stuck in the hotel watching the telly. I saw some lampshade hats and a woman in immaculate silks and brocades who looked almost as beautiful as Miss Ma chasing a man with a big nose around a pigsty whilst declaring her undying love (not an unusual type of occurrence in Chinese TV drama). No, I quickly realized, this was not possible, no-one could be as beautiful as Miss Ma, it must be the lady herself and blow me when the titles rolled it was.