

NOTEBOOK

June 19, 2012 9:45 pm

A slam-dunk case for Didier Drogba

By Patti Waldmeir

(As imagined by Patti Waldmeir.)

Dear Di Di Ai,

Yes Didier, that is what your name will be when you move to China. I hear that's what you're planning to do: cap off your Champions League victory with Chelsea by playing out your twilight years for Shanghai Shenhua, a team nobody has ever heard of. I guess it helps that the salary is almost unheard of (could the rumours be true, that you've been offered £200,000 a week? Wouldn't that make you one of the world's best paid footballers?)

But I digress. My name is Si Di Fen Ma Bu Li and I play for the Beijing Ducks, which won this year's Chinese Basketball Association title for the first time thanks to me. Back when I played for the Phoenix Suns and New York Knicks (among other teams) in the US's National Basketball Association, they called me Stephon Marbury, but what with the creative spelling of my first name, and the tricky consonants in the surname, it seemed simpler just to stick with Si De Fen Ma Bu Li. You might want to do the same with Di Di Ai De Luo Ba (the Chinese version of your name): Didier translates pretty well into Mandarin, but Drogba? C'mon. English speakers have enough trouble with west African double consonants, and they colonised half of that coastline. You can't really expect the Chinese to do any better.

So we both have names that, under other circumstances, might constitute a bit of a trade barrier. But that's not all we have in common: we're both black, we both have a bit of a bad-boy image, we both were considered to be getting too old for our home league – and we both thought the solution was to skip the country to play ball.

For my part, I was a child prodigy: Spike Lee even made a film about me. Did you ever see the movie *He Got Game*? Well, that's my story. Things went downhill after that, unfortunately, and I ended up leaving the US after a bit of a dust-up about sex with an intern ...

But that's all ancient history now that I've become one of the most famous sports stars in China. With a bit of luck, you can be one too. I have my own newspaper column in *China Daily*, nearly 400,000 fans on Sina Weibo, the Chinese Twitter, and last month a statue of me was erected in Beijing. Not bad, for a has-been.

But the truth is, I really love this place: I love the language, I love the food, I love the fact that I finally got to play in a final after 16 years in professional basketball (and though I don't usually stress this fact, I love the idea that I could one day sell 1.3bn pairs of athletic shoes here). Surely you can do the same: parlay that winning penalty against Bayern Munich in the Champions League final into a brand that will rake in both kudos and cash in your new homeland. It may take a while to stomach the stinky tofu and get your tongue around the tones. But hey, it's worth it!

In fact, from what I hear, it's not just has-been ball players who can make this thing work: Wall Street has-beens can do it too. Legions of foreign bankers, management consultants, engineers, English teachers, lawyers, doctors and journalists have come to China to get far better jobs than they could have had at home, especially in the midst of a financial crisis. The technical term, I believe, is "big-fish-in-small-pond-ism". Try to say that in Mandarin.

Recently, the Chinese have got a bit resentful about the fact that a white face and a toffee accent can double a guy's salary in some industries. One famous state TV personality recently commended the government for trying to "clean out foreign trash". His gripe was that "people who can't find jobs in the US and Europe come to China to grab our money, engage in human trafficking and spread deceitful lies to encourage emigration".

But don't let that worry you; the Chinese have always had a love-hate relationship with foreigners. They envy us, they despise us, they idolise and fear us, all in the same breath, and they are famous for disliking Africans more than most. Get over it.

Di Di Ai De Luo Ba, take it from Si Di Fen Ma Bu Li: embrace China, and China will embrace you right back. What's a few consonants here or there?: when it comes to sport (and money), they might as well all be speaking Esperanto.

Yours (somewhat) sincerely,

Stephon Marbury

Beijing Ducks

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NOTEBOOK

November 20, 2012 7:15 pm

My part in China's war on corruption

By Patti Waldmeir in Shanghai

An expression of gratitude is sullied when it lines pockets, writes Patti Waldmeir

China is hardly the most corrupt place that I have ever worked – but Beijing would not much like being lumped in with the other ones (Zaire under Mobutu Sese Seko anyone?).

Now China wants us all to think that it is rising above corruption. Virtually anyone who said anything at the 18th party conference that has just ended found a way to mention how much they hate it. And Beijing has diverted Wang Qishan, the west's favourite economic reformer, from managing the economy to hunting corrupt officials. I am planning to do my bit to help him. It involves refusing to donate even one renminbi this holiday season, unless I know exactly how it will be spent. Sound simple? You'd be surprised.

In the 12 years since I adopted two Chinese babies, I've had plenty of time to practise donating cash to mainland orphanages. These days, I never do it unless coerced (or unless Half the Sky Foundation, a US charity, controls it). Unfortunately, coercion does sometimes come into it.

Like other foreign adoptive parents, I sometimes take my children to visit the institutions where they spent their infancy. We parents go there with hearts overflowing with gratitude for the priceless gift of a precious child. Some orphanage directors are more than happy to relieve us of that burden of gratitude.

One of my children is from an orphanage where the director, a government official, has created a nice little business in orphan homecomings, which include a lavish meal, hugs from the caregivers, and a shower of gifts for the returning child. The quid pro quo is: the parent makes a large cash donation.

Insiders warned me that a donation in crisp new renminbi would never see the outside of the director's pocket, so last time I promised to shop locally for things the orphanage needed – and pay with my bank card.

When we arrived, the director scooped up my daughter in a

bear hug – and informed me that he had already purchased the goods he wanted me to donate, and could I please pay for them. I pleaded lack of cash, but he made clear that a trip to the ATM would be required, before there would be any more hugs.

I never had much luck resisting pointed requests for bribes in Mobutu's Zaire, and neither did I with him: we were whisked off to inspect a room full of new quilts, at which point the director asked me how much I was prepared to donate for them.

“How much did they cost?” I asked, displaying the New World naivety so despised in the ancient culture that is China. He quoted a figure that was many times their market value. I handed over the cash, he handed over the fake receipt, and another stone was laid in the edifice of corruption in China.

When I later discovered that other families had also been shown the same quilts, and told they had paid for them, I tried to warn visiting families of the quilts-with-nine-lives scam – but found that most did not want to hear it. Some put into words what I know was in my heart that day: to give my daughter positive memories of that difficult time in her life, I was prepared to be cheated.

I decided to avoid that orphanage in future, until I could find a way around the quilt scam. So instead, I made a trip to an institution for severely disabled children, close to our home in Shanghai – only to find that Wang Qishan may have some work to do there too. Foreign volunteers at that orphanage told me that they always brought clothing and toys to donate, but had never seen them in use on subsequent visits – a classic red flag that the goods are at worst being sold, or at best being locked away from the intended recipients.

Then I heard that the well-meaning foreign volunteers were planning to pay in cash for some building repairs: another classic opportunity to charge donors 10 times the cost and pocket the difference. But the donors did not want to believe that could happen: they declined to use their own contractor or insist the orphanage get more than one quote. They prefer to feel good about giving – and leave the rest to fate.

After a couple of sobering experiences of charity scams at Chinese schools, I have made up my mind to help Mr Wang by refusing to buy one more fake quilt, pay for one more fake building repair, or even fund one more fake hug for my darling daughter. I am going to do China the favour of not treating it like Zaire. I too am responsible.

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NOTEBOOK

October 23, 2012 5:52 pm

Puppy love found in running dogs

By Patti Waldmeir in Shanghai

Popularity of pets increases with the spread of capitalism, says Patti Waldmeir

Beijing wants the Chinese to spend more money, and doting pet owners are happy to oblige. Dogs in pushchairs, baby slings and body suits turned out recently for Shanghai's Pet Fair Asia, a celebration of all that is infantile in Chinese pet culture.

They bought pet beds shaped like Moses baskets and baby cradles, tiny doggy tutus and little canine Crocs. They pushed prams full of teacup Yorkies and bought playpens for the Pekinese. Some pooches wore nappies and many more snuggled up to their owners' chests in the canine version of an infant carrier. In China, it seems, chestdogs are the new lapdog.

Chinese communism had no fondness for running dogs, metaphorical or real. But as capitalism has spread in China, so have its dogs: pet ownership has exploded since Beijing figured out that the running dogs had a point. Pet care spending will almost double by 2017 in current prices, according to Euromonitor, which predicts a market of Rmb13bn (\$2.1bn) by then.

The first generation of post-Mao pet owners tended to treat their dogs a bit like their Gucci handbags: as a proxy for their bank balance. But now, like all overworked, angst-ridden, low birth-rate capitalist societies worldwide, China has started to expect something more existential from its dogs: love, companionship – and eldercare. In traditional Chinese society, children were responsible for that kind of thing. But in one-child China, pets are the new offspring.

Dogs were unwelcome in Chinese cities under communism, not just because of their bourgeois associations but because they were (and still are) carriers of diseases such as rabies, which remains a serious threat even in postmodern Shanghai. In rural areas, dogs were for barking and cats were for catching mice: they did not sleep in Moses baskets.

“Now things are changing,” says Amy Liu, of Mars, the top petfood maker in China. “Older people and single-child families are owning dogs more and more for emotional bonding,” she says, noting that “people have more and more money, less and less time, and the rhythm of life is faster and faster”.

“They are looking for attachment, the same way as in the west,” she says – as good a sign as any that Chinese capitalism is coming of age.

Except in one area: the Chinese still insist on feeding their pets from the table rather than the petfood tin. “Chinese people treat pets like babies and the Chinese love cooking,” says the frustrated pet food executive.

The Chinese may have gone all doe-eyed about their dogs – but not quite doe-eyed enough to buy them packaged dog food.

Food for thought

And speaking of dog food, canines themselves are still treated as food in some areas of China – though far less than in the days of the running dogs. My own Shanghai household includes one mutt that narrowly escaped providing lunch for some security guards (prompting us to give him the perhaps indelicate name Dumpling), and another that was abandoned, as is the Shanghai custom, when her previous owners found out they were having a baby. Registering those two strays with the Shanghai government used to cost me Rmb2,000 a year, per dog; luckily that fee was recently cut to Rmb300 (half price if they are spayed).

Mutts like them were not much in evidence at the Shanghai pet fair, where pedigree was all. But just as the Chinese upper classes are getting bored of their Guccis and logo-laden Louis Vuitton handbags – and turning toward niche brands that broadcast their individuality rather than merely their assets – so too is China learning to dote on dogs of all types, rather than just show off with the pure breeds.

That is good news for the pet market, but maybe not such a good sign for Beijing’s leaders as they prepare for the Communist party’s 18th congress in two weeks. More pets are a sign of greater Chinese affluence – but could also be a sign of greater Chinese angst. A recent Pew survey of Chinese attitudes found mainlanders more stressed out these days about the side effects of rapid economic growth.

Pets are good for reducing that stress – but people who are not tense in the first place do not need them. And demographers take note: China already faces a labour shortage because of its low birth rate; but dogs are cheaper and easier to raise than kids – and they don’t talk back.

Who needs a child when a dog will do just as nicely, asks the Chinese middle class? White-collar workers of the world unite – behind their canines.



NOTEBOOK

December 4, 2012 5:31 pm

The folly of ranking national nirvana

By Patti Waldmeir in Shanghai

If the state wants to spread joy, it should bring out the pocketbook, writes Patti Waldmeir

I recently bought and devoured a book called *The Happiness Project: Or, Why I Spent a Year Trying to Sing in the Morning, Clean My Closets, Fight Right, Read Aristotle, and Generally Have More Fun*. But you won't get me admitting that in public.

There is something just too risible about a grown woman seeking the path to nirvana on Amazon.com. How much more risible when governments set out to measure the national nirvana rating – and even pay government officials based on the bliss factor.

Happiness has been official government policy in China for a while. Having done the gross domestic product thing, Beijing is now trying to hit emotional highs to match the economic ones. Numerous cities have set up a “happiness index” based on everything from the number of pollution particles in the air to subjective factors for measuring municipal ecstasy. Sometimes government officials are even denied promotions if the citizenry is not gleeful enough.

Of course China was hardly the first country to genuflect in the direction of happiness. Thomas Jefferson mentioned the pursuit of bliss in the US Declaration of Independence and David Cameron thought that, almost 800 years after Magna Carta, Britain also needed to pay more attention to gross national happiness.

But when CCTV, China's state broadcaster, went out to take the pulse of national wellness on the eve of the 18th Communist party congress, its impromptu poll found some respondents had no idea what they were being asked while others thought it was best to answer in the affirmative – regardless of the question. One migrant worker had the perfect riposte: “Are you happy?” they asked him. “No, my surname is Zeng,” he replied. That is not quite the non sequitur that it sounds. In Mandarin, “are you happy?” sounds a bit like “is your last name Fu”? It wasn't clear whether Mr Zeng was denying just the surname, or the state of mind.

And when a CCTV reporter asked a street vendor in Sichuan province the same question, he caused chaos: the vendor, doubtless unlicensed, thought he was being raided and raised the alarm, sending nearby illegals scurrying through the streets pursued by CCTV reporters insisting plaintively that “we only want to know if you are happy”.

Since money helps make people happy, it seems likely that plenty of Chinese are feeling contented – whether or not they want to tell that to CCTV. A survey of public opinion from the Pew Global Attitudes Project found that 92 per cent of Chinese report being more prosperous than their parents at a similar age. But if Beijing truly wants to know the answer, it might be best to get someone other than an arm of the state to ask the questions. The Pew survey also found growing concern about income inequality, pollution, corruption, food safety and a host of other issues.



Not surprisingly, Beijing’s happiness project has been the subject of relentless ribbing on social media, where political parody is alive and thriving despite the Great Firewall. But that did not stop both outgoing Communist party secretary Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping, his successor, from mentioning the “h” word in their congress speeches.

Mr Xi took an oath of loyalty to the national ecstasy project but made it amply clear that happiness begins at home. “Every bit of happiness in the world is created by hard work,” he said.

And even in China, good happiness ratings do not always guarantee political success. Bo Xilai, the disgraced party chief of Chongqing, managed to get his town named China’s happiest city in 2010. Today he faces a criminal probe.

Perhaps he should have taken a leaf from Shanghai’s book. The city’s health bureau recently announced new steps to combat medical malpractice, including subjecting hospital heads to a dressing down for mistakes such as “operating on the wrong body part”. Now that is a recipe for bliss if ever there was one.

What I learnt from my own personal Happiness Project – which, thankfully, had nothing to do with clean closets – is that most people are about as happy as they decide to be (and money helps). So Beijing should probably get out the pocketbook and put away the TV cameras.

Nothing does happiness more harm than giving it too much thought: as John Stuart Mill said: “Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so.” How much more so, when CCTV is doing the asking.

NOTEBOOK

March 13, 2012 1:50 pm

Why vote when you can whinge?

By Patti Waldmeir

Beijing makes sure the consumer complaints hotline never rings unanswered, writes Patti Waldmeir

Tomorrow is national complaints day in China – a day when Beijing will do all it can to encourage citizens to grouse about something. That may not sound like the kind of thing that authoritarian governments normally do: but the leadership has gone to great lengths to create a culture of complaining.

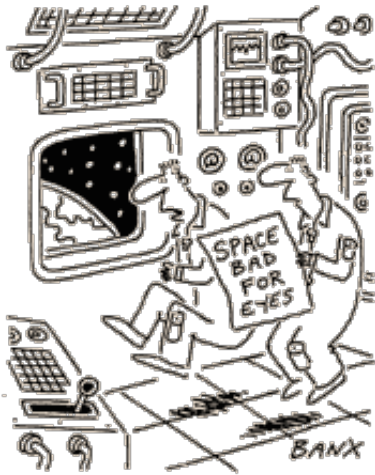
The grievances in question are all about money: the target is corporate behaviour that violates consumer rights. To encourage consumers to defend those rights, CCTV, the state-owned broadcaster, will air a two-hour primetime whinge-athon tomorrow night, to mark World Consumer Rights Day (a day celebrated with more gusto in China than almost anywhere else).

It is not a one-off affair: any day of the year, Chinese citizens can call 12315, a round-the-clock telephone hotline, whenever they feel they have been bested by the market. There are even daily complaint shows on state radio stations, where the host will mediate individual disputes, live on air, with the company involved. In a country where consumers regularly get duped by everything from fake eggs to fake Apple stores, having a place to go to carp about it is truly a government service worthy of that title.

It is all part of creating the “harmonious society” that the leadership is always going on about (including the recent meetings of what passes, in China, for a parliament). If one can enlist the power of the Communist party to protect one’s pocketbook, who needs democracy?

Beijing figured out long ago that the fewer political rights people have, the more consumer rights they need. China’s leaders are not responsive at the ballot box, but they make darned sure the consumer complaints hotline never rings unanswered.

Recently, I set out to experience at first hand “the party that listens”. I called 12315 to report two grave miscarriages of justice: the day I got bacon in my hotpot when I ordered lamb; and the day a Financial Times team got charged for breaking a clothes hanger at a hotel – though hanging up our clothes is not a habit most FT journalists cultivate.



"I can't see the Great Wall of China."

The response in both cases was prompt – and baffling. I had to call in twice to register the bacon-masquerading-as-lamb complaint. In a country where food safety scandals make daily headlines, the operator thought it was a quality issue, and referred me to the food safety hotline. My colleague, who was acting as translator, had to call back to clarify that the problem was not the quality of the meat but the fact that it had come from the wrong animal. (A fact that I proclaimed vociferously to the restaurateur, saying that after 56 years on this earth, I know the difference between a pig and a sheep.)

The 12315 operator informed me politely that if I had been sickened by the – let's just call it "animal protein" – then the hotline could help me get compensation for medical costs. But if I just had to endure eating the wrong thing for lunch, then there was nothing she could do – especially as I had kept neither a copy of the receipt nor a sample of the offending protein.

The clothes hanger complaint was more straightforward – but from a western point of view, ultimately less satisfying. It seemed a clear case of fraud: a Chinese hotel surreptitiously added breakage charges to our bill – which was not produced at check-out until we demanded to see it. Hotel staff removed the charges immediately – with their eyes averted – but it was clear that they would try the same thing again with the next inattentive traveller.

In this case, the government's position was: you got your money back, case closed. But what about the next poor sod who gets tricked that way, I asked, steamed up about the injustice of it all. The operator seemed baffled by my quaint American notion that the government should investigate the scam to prevent it recurring: in the land of 12315, it is every comrade for himself.

Gruel intentions

Never one to miss a trick in showing that the government is responsive to the needs of its citizens – so responsive that they do not even need democracy – Shanghai plans to build hundreds of "breakfast carts" where harried working mothers can take the kid for a steamed bun or a bowl of rice porridge before work. So that, these days, is Chinese socialism: the right to a gripe and a bowl of gruel in the morning. Who could ask for anything more?

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