

NOTEBOOK

April 24, 2012 7:20 pm

China catches the spirit of Route 66

B. Patti Waldmeir

RV enthusiasts are pioneering a new Chinese lifestyle, writes Patti Waldmeir

Wang Xudong loves camping so much that he named his month-old twins the Chinese equivalent of “Cam” and “Ping”. And the kind of camping he loves is caravanning.

Sitting in a deck chair outside his Chinese-made motor home parked in Beijing's largest “RV park” – where a luxury imported American recreational vehicle, or RV, can be rented for a cool £400 a night – Mr Wang waxes lyrical about China's nascent RV culture and the joys of life on the open road.

He tells a tale of urban Chinese who are plum worn out by work yet still happy to battle Beijing's gargantuan traffic jams on Friday night just for the chance to wake up next day and breathe the fresh air of an RV park.

“Even in a traffic jam, I am happy,” says Mr Wang, who last Friday fought through an evening of fearsome thunderstorms to arrive at Beijing's Nanshan RV park at 10pm – where he immediately set about barbecuing his supper in the pouring rain.

It is all worth it, he says, for the chance to get away from it all and engage in the kind of games that grown boys everywhere love: racing around in all-terrain vehicles, grilling meat and jumping waves on the jet ski. Blink and this could be Los Angeles.

But the pot of gruel boiling in the rice cooker on Mr Wang's picnic table says it is not: this is China and it is not yet a kingdom of RV enthusiasts. On paper, China has about 100 caravan parks – but most of them are pretty useless, since they are neither located on tourist routes nor within reach of anything that might be called scenery.

So RV pioneers need a caravan with Chinese characteristics: a generator, a tank that can hold water for three or four days and a shovel to bury several days worth of poo, in the absence of a US-style sewage hookup.

Then there's Grandma: the Chinese middle class love to travel with the grandparents in tow and China's 30 or 40 RV manufacturers are happy to make caravans to order, with facilities for Grandpa's wheelchair or a disabled loo.

Carting the elders around in an RV is “a form of filial piety”, says Mr Wang, enlisting no less an ally than Confucius to support his caravanning habit.

With only 5,000 RV owners, China has a long way to go before it catches up with the US, the spiritual home of the RV, where there are nearly 9m caravanners. But Mr Wang forecasts that RVs will catch on like BMWs in China in the years to come, as a symbol of an all new Chinese way of life that embraces nature, mobility, and the right to stop and go at will – a Route 66 kind of lifestyle that could not be more different from riding a Chinese bicycle.

Novelt. value

Liu Yujiao heads the RV sales department at one of China's leading RV makers, Great Wall Motors. He says lots of people in Europe and America have time and money for RV travel, while the super-rich in China have money but no time.

So China's RVs are driven by small entrepreneurs, white-collar workers and retired government officials. They buy locally produced RVs for travel or entertaining while the überwealthy sometimes buy imported caravans – minimum price Rmb1.3m (\$205,000) – to impress their business contacts.

Locally made RVs cost nothing like that much – Great Wall's RVs run from Rmb220,000 to Rmb250,000 – but they cost more than the average American family would spend on a caravan, he says. Mr Liu expects the costs of production to drop once Chinese RV makers start to enjoy the economies of scale that only a nation of 1.3bn potential caravanners can deliver.

But that may take a while: at the moment, RVs are still so novel that when one rocks up at a motorway toll booth, staff are often baffled how to charge for it. Even getting a number plate for an RV can be hard.

Silk Road reversed

The Wangs of the world will be towing generators and burying poo for a few more years before China's RV infrastructure catches up with the revolution in the hearts of those who love the freedom of the motorway.

Meanwhile, Mr Wang and members of his online RV club (www.21rv.com) are trying to set up a trip across central Asia to attend the London Olympics. That gives the word “caravan” a whole new meaning; Marco Polo never had it so good.

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NOTEBOOK

November 6, 2012 6:30 pm

China discovers its inner tree-hugger

B. Patti Waldmeir in Shanghai

Children under the age of six spend less than an hour outdoors every day, writes Patti Waldmeir

Chinese children spend less time playing outdoors than any kids on earth – and everyone from their parents to their political leaders is starting to get worried about it.

According to a recent survey of the children of 14 nations by Gymboree, a US company that teaches children how to play, and gets paid for it, Chinese kids under six spend less than an hour outdoors every day, only a quarter of the global average. Spending time in the great outdoors is, apparently, a luxury that most Chinese parents think their children can ill-afford (along with sleeping; China also places third to last in the tiny tot sleep rankings).

But these days, nature is a lot more popular in China than it used to be. Some of the same middle class parents who keep their kids inside studying when they could be outside chasing fireflies have turned out in their tens of thousands to protest when chemical factories threaten the environment in Xiamen, Dalian and, last week, in Ningbo.

Indeed, as China's political leaders meet in Beijing on Thursday for the most important Communist party congress in recent memory, the political ramifications of this new fondness for nature will be high on their agenda. Many of this year's biggest street protests have been not-in-my-backyard environmental revolts. Beijing wants to make sure the Nimbies stay on message (and do not stray into broader politics).

So China's middle class is finally discovering its inner tree-hugger. But it may take the children of China a while to catch up. Zeng Lan realised that when she took her small son on an outing to the Shanghai Botanical Garden organised by Friends of Nature, a local charity that is working hard to overcome what is sometimes known in China as "nature deficit disorder" (Sir David Attenborough seems to think British children have a touch of it, too).

"At first he kept complaining that everything was dirty," she says. "He thought it wasn't clean because it wasn't a shopping mall. And when it got dark, he was scared because in a shopping mall, it's always daytime."

By the end of the outing, her son was getting down with the insects – just like little boys everywhere, though he remains none too keen on the unclean. According to a McKinsey survey, China's children may soon be seeing less of the inside of shopping malls anyway. The proportion of Chinese consumers who identify “retail-tainment” as a favourite pastime has fallen from more than half a few years ago to about 40 per cent now, and will be less than a third by 2020. That leaves a lot more time for fireflies.

Shanghai resident Chen Hong says she and her 12-year-old son Jack Xie normally spend Sunday mornings reading ancient Chinese poetry. That is the closest Jack usually gets to nature on a Sunday morning: the mountains, streams and forests of traditional Chinese poetry. One recent weekend, however, she and Jack went instead to nearby Chongming island, to the Dongtan wetland nature reserve, on another Friends of Nature outing for kids with concrete overload.

Jack, like normal tweenagers everywhere, had zero inherent interest in a spot of tree hugging. And to make matters worse, it was his 12th birthday, a day he would have preferred to spend at the karaoke bar. Instead he found himself roused from bed before sunrise to watch a pre-dawn avian opera performed by the egrets and grebes, the sandpipers and kingfishers of the Dongtan salt marsh.

His verdict on the outing? “Anything is better than doing homework.” The weekend was not quite free of the dreaded H-word even so: Jack had to work until 11pm on Friday night to sneak away for a weekend with the birds. And on Saturday night, when the rest of us went out with a flashlight scouting out copulating crickets, silkworms munching mulberry leaves and frogs that swell up alarmingly to help them croak louder, Jack stayed back at the hotel swotting.

Still, he was there on Sunday morning at 6am, the first to spot the white wagtail – a bird that he learnt to recognise, ironically, by reading an article in which Lu Xun, the famous modern Chinese writer, complains that too much schoolwork inhibited his own enjoyment of nature.

Jack soon had nature overload so he spent the rest of the morning chuckling over a comic book or ostentatiously checking his watch. When he grows up, however, he might at least remember that there is more to life than shopping malls – and that it gets dark at night outside the Louis Vuitton store.



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Apr 23 2012

Video: China falls for the US car dream

With more than 230 million drivers, the car is profoundly changing Chinese society. The FT's Patti Waldmeir looks at how the automobile is transforming the way Chinese people live and play. (3m 22sec)

To watch this video, click <http://video.ft.com/v/1577342006001/China-falls-for-the-US-car-dream>



NOTEBOOK

January 17, 2012 8:12 pm

Meet the parents: a fiancé for hire

By Patti Waldmeir

Every single girl knows what her parents want for Chinese New Year, writes Patti Waldmeir

This is a tough time of year for Chinese spinsters. Chinese New Year is just around the corner and every single girl knows what her parents want most for the holidays: a betrothal.

Girls of a certain age (say, 30) do not dare go home at all without one; and even women in their 20s feel serious pressure not to turn up for this Sunday's traditional new year's eve dinner without a marriage prospect in tow.

Now, thanks to Taobao (the Chinese version of Ebay) and the inventiveness of the Chinese entrepreneur, they do not need to: for as little as Rmb100 per day, Chinese singles can rent a boyfriend to take home for lunar new year.

Chatting up the parents is included in the price, while hand-holding and hugging sometimes cost extra. The boyfriend-substitute will even share a bedchamber with the customer, if that helps persuade the doubting parents. There seems little limit to the a la carte ingenuity of the companies that provide this service: some even offer to waive the fee if the girl and guy share the same bed.

Zhu Sheng, 27, is one of the Taobao entrepreneurs dedicated to filling this gap in the Chinese matrimonial market. He says he got the idea from a movie, where a man rents a contract girlfriend to take home for new year. But Mr Zhu could not find any girls who wanted to take the risk, so he decided to rent out his friends instead. "They didn't have girlfriends either and they didn't want to go to their hometown without one, so this way they could get a girl and earn money at the same time!" he says. He says about 100 companies now offer boyfriend rental online.

Last year, he and his friends got 10 takers, he says: though in one case they decided to refund the client's money after her parents discovered the deception and were deeply hurt by it. Mr Zhu – a gangly youth with big teeth and unruly hair – volunteers that he is not good looking enough to play the role of holiday Lothario, so he leaves the escort bit to his taller, better looking friends. One of them is even married: when he needs to play boyfriend,

he tells his wife he is travelling for business.

And what about the girls? In a country with a severe shortage of females of marriageable age, surely anyone who needs to rent a boyfriend must be fat, old and surly? Not so, says Mr Zhu: his clients average about 25 years old and are “not ugly” – just eager to please their parents.

Shanghai blues

Eager enough to rent male companionship, but not so eager, it seems, that they rush into marriage. According to figures published recently by the Shanghai government, the average marriage age of women in this city of 23m people is 29.9 – which must mean lots of post-30 weddings.

Mr Zhu has an answer for all that loneliness: he will provide a boyfriend on demand, not just for Chinese New Year, but all year long. Feeling under the weather, or just too bored to go to work? One of Mr Zhu's escorts will call in sick for you, then bring chicken soup round to your flat – for Rmb100 per half day. Feeling lonely? Mr Zhu's staff will chat to you, for Rmb20 per hour.

He is far from the only one offering surrogate male conversation on Taobao. One service charges Rmb10 per hour for chatting on topics of male interest, Rmb20 for topics of female interest – and Rmb30 if the boyfriend actually pays attention to what the girl is saying.

But Mr Zhu trumps them all with his offer that, for Rmb500, clients can shout at, abuse and generally belittle his escorts for an entire day. Has he had any takers for this “harridan special”? Just one so far – “but we turned her down because we were afraid she would beat us”.

A taste on tradition

Just as marriage is not the only casualty of modern urban life in China, fake fiancés are not the only service available to help today's Chinese meet traditional obligations they no longer have time for.

One online merchant offers an ancestral tomb sweeping service for the annual holiday of Qingming in the spring. “We will visit the tomb, clean it, burn paper money, read or broadcast a message from you to the dead person, play sad music, kowtow on your behalf,” and even send a video documenting all this traditional obeisance, says one advertisement online.

Who needs 5,000 years of civilisation, when there's Taobao?

NOTEBOOK

Jul. 3, 2012 7:37 pm

The bare necessities of naked marriage

By Patti Waldmeir

China's Romeos and Juliets are experimenting with new forms of wedlock

If it weren't for the dumplings, the language, the skyscrapers – and the fact that McDonald's delivers 24 hours a day – I could swear that today's Shanghai is just like the America of my childhood.

Whatever story the latest economic numbers tell, there is a pervasive sense of optimism in China – a confidence that every child will live a more prosperous life than his parents. I last experienced such sanguineness in my home town of Detroit in the 1960s. And we all know how that turned out.

The similarities do not end there: in its own way, China is also experiencing a 1960s-style sexual revolution (with a dash of women's liberation thrown in). Many more people are having sex before marriage, living in sin, cheating on spouses and rejecting marriage altogether. The institution itself, long seen as a contract between two families, is morphing into new shapes in China. The Chinese version of the Montagues and Capulets are mostly none too happy about it: but their own Romeos and Juliets are experimenting with new ways to form families and coining new terms for them, such as “naked marriage” (with no ceremony or flat to live in) or “AA marriage” (this means bride and groom split the cost – nothing to do with how drunk the groom gets at the wedding).

Many urbanites are refusing to marry at all. Shanghai expects marriage registrations to drop 17 per cent this year alone. The number of single Shanghai women in their late 20s has tripled in 15 years and the city's fertility rate has fallen to among the lowest in the world.

A true “naked marriage” strips away all the trappings of a modern Chinese wedding, the cost of which has risen by a mere 4,000 times in the past 30 years, according to one recent survey. The ceremony itself is only part of the problem – because guests traditionally give cash gifts, some weddings actually yield a profit. The bigger issue is property prices. The vast majority of Chinese in-laws think the groom must own a flat before marriage, but many of marriageable age cannot afford even the tiniest Shanghai bolt-hole. Not surprisingly, a recent online survey showed that 74 per cent of Chinese men liked the idea of the naked form of marriage.

Joyce Wang a 33-year-old Shanghai internet entrepreneur and newlywed, says she had a ceremony to please her parents but rebuffed their demands that she choose a man with a flat first. “I gave my mum a choice: we could wait eight years until we had the money to buy a flat, or get married now without one. At my age, my parents thought I should get married, by any means.”



To be truly naked in matrimony, the couple must obey the “five nos”: no ring, no ceremony, no honeymoon, no flat and no car. Rmb9 (\$1.42) and a trip to the registry office and they are joined for life. This drives Chinese parents crazy, since the wedding of their only child is a great chance to flaunt their nouveau Chinese prosperity. So some couples have wedding photos taken even though they had no wedding, as a sop to parents.

Shanghai parks are glutted every weekend with brides in white gowns and trainers. For some, that will be the closest they ever get to the altar.

So China is seeing love and sex transformed by economics – and not just by property prices. As women's earning power rises, they are marrying later: the average marriage age of women in urban areas is 30. This has spawned a vibrant matchmaking industry. Alongside the fake brides in Shanghai's People's Park at weekends there is also a marriage market where desperate parents seek mates for sons and daughters in danger of becoming “leftover women” (spinsters) or “bare branches” (bachelors).

And at the confluence of high property prices and women's liberation, there is premarital sex: 71 per cent of mainlanders in one new survey say they had sex before marriage (partly because they could not afford to buy the flat needed to have post-marital sex). The number has shot up since Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms. “The change that has occurred in China usually takes 100-200 years in many countries,” the sexologist Li Yinhe told the Financial Times. The Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences launched a competing survey saying only 1 per cent of city residents were cohabiting outside marriage – a fairly blatant attempt to assuage public concerns about growing promiscuity. Doubtless the truth lies somewhere in the middle, but what is clear is that from capitalism to sex, where the west leads, China these days is never far behind.

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