

About Chocolate by Glenda Levitt

About 35 years ago, while doing business in China, Abel made contact with a young man, Degang Zou. Some months later, we flew on a working trip to China. Abel and I arranged to meet with Degang in an industrial town, Shishi. This factory town of unattractive concrete, dull, grey buildings had mushroomed up from nowhere over the previous 10 years.



The sites and scenes were unlike anything we had ever experienced. There was an open channel of sewerage running right through the center of the main street of the town.

There we met with the about 24-year-old Degang. He was wearing a washed out, faded polo shirt and pants, both of which were just too small for him and on his feet, plastic thong sandals. We were booked in at a seedy looking hotel and he told us with a combination of trepidation and pride that he had rented a room in the hotel to display a collection of garments that he hoped would be of interest to us.

After greeting Degang whose English was excellent, Abel's first words were, "Is there a stationery shop nearby?" I took a deep breath to hold against the odor, hurried across the road and entered the modest little shop. Abel asked for a brief case, a foolscap pad and some pens and pencils which he presented to Degang. He explained that from now on, whenever he had a business appointment with anyone, he was to be armed with these tools. For tens of thousands of workers, it was life without the basic commodities that we so take for granted.

We visited the jacket manufacturing factory and in the courtyard were hundreds of workers sitting cross legged on the ground in neat rows, each with a little bowl and spoon. On one side was a giant cauldron of rice cooking over a fire, ready for the daily portion dishing- out to workers who awaited their meal before returning to work.

The following year, Degang met us by bicycle and was modestly but pleasantly dressed in a shirt and long pants. A few years later he met us with his car. Although our business dealings continued in the industrial town, Degang had now moved to the picturesque coastal city of Xiamen.

Getting to know Degang and build a close relationship over the years, enabled us to discover a rare person who has enriched our lives.

He was born in a small village in the extreme North of China which is under snow for 6 months of the year. Only one crop can survive there, specifically during the summer, a grain for making beer, the only customer being a government owned factory. Living conditions were extremely severe. Degang told us that as a child, for his birthday, his mother saved him an egg as a special treat. At the age of 12 he was spotted by a visiting government educational committee as being intellectually gifted. He was selected to attend a boarding school, a 3-day train journey from his home. He was allowed home once a year for 3 weeks over the Chinese New Year. Almost one week of the visit was taken up with travelling. He recounted his memories of his school years to us. Extreme cold in winter, extreme heat in summer, always hungry and always exhausted from lack of sleep. The competition to academically shine above others, was relentless.

Degang finished high school and with his high marks was eligible to enter one of the prestigious universities. He expressed his amazement at how on arriving at university he saw a telephone for the first time in his life. He also described how, while chatting with students, the word 'chocolate' was mentioned; a word he had never heard before. He had no idea what a chocolate was. But after some time, he discovered its delectable flavor. Degang studied Communication and English and went on to qualify with a degree in the top 100 of his year out of 15,000 students.

One day Abel asked Degang to check out a factory that could be of interest to us. After his visit, Degang explained that although the factory wasn't suitable, we may have changed his life because he met Annie, a secretary there and really liked her.

Then came the news that they were engaged and there was going to be a celebration party at the home of Annie's parents. Degang worked out the matching time in Israel and arranged for a phone call with us during the party so that we could be part of the festivities.

Next came the invitation to the wedding. We were thrilled beyond words. The day of the wedding began with us attending a pre wedding event in Xiamen. At the entrance of the wedding beauty salon was a large poster of the engaged couple. We were welcomed by Degang and his parents and a few friends. Degang's mother hugged me, then looped her arm through mine and remained close to me, exchanging frequent smiles. The language barrier could not affect the powerful emotional bond of joy we



Abel, Degang and the bride's mother

both shared. Then Annie made her dramatic entrance, floating down the wide staircase looking stunning in, to my surprise, a very traditional gorgeous Western white dress. After snacks, we drove to the home city of Annie where the main celebration was to take place.

It was in the banquet hall of a 5-star hotel. The hall was filled with glitz and glamour with the décor in the dominant good luck colour of red. There must have been more than 300 guests there with Abel and I being the only 2 Westerners.

A private civil marriage ceremony had already taken place in a government office. This was one gigantic party. There were speeches by Degang and his father. Of course, we understood nothing except suddenly hearing our names and the guests all responding enthusiastically with applause and cheers. Annie disappeared for a short while and returned looking dazzling, wearing a classic, elegant red dress accompanied by a little flower girl also dressed in red.



The newly weds, Degang and Annie

We sat at our table admiring the settings with beautiful ornate centre pieces, basking in the privilege of being there. What touched me more than anything, were the two delicious, irresistible chocolates placed on the side plate of every single guest.

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