

# **Gan Bei!**

## **An American Expert Flying High over Communist China**

**by Desmond Jolly**

*Gan Bei is the Chinese equivalent of “Cheers,” “Skol.” or “Down the Hatch.” We are being feted at a banquet in our honor at the end of our mission in Zoughzou County in Heilongiang Province in northern China. The banquet is being held in the Communist Party Headquarters, a tomb-like concrete structure somewhere not far from Wei Shin State Farm, where we have been staying. What am I doing here?*

When one of my UC Davis’ students, Joshua Muldavin, asked me if I would be interested in going to China with a small team of consultants to evaluate potential agro-industrial development projects in Heilongiang, I already knew what my answer would ultimately be. “I’ll think about it.” I said. But I had two young children ages eight and five, and though I could not calculate the risks associated

with that adventure, I suspected they were not negligible.

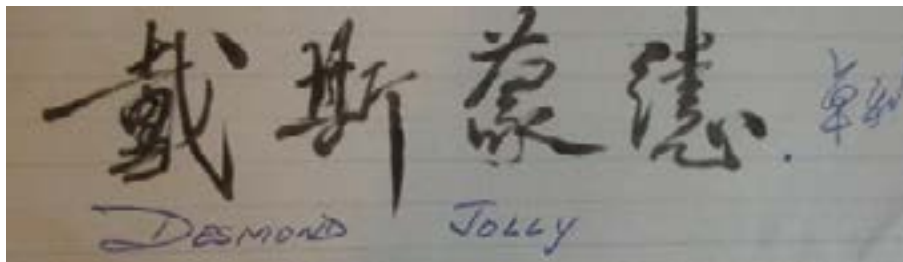
I also remember how my fear of flying affected the psychological limits I placed on my aspirations. I had a fear of success because if I became successful to the point of becoming famous, I would have to do a lot of flying. Famous people flew a lot. I read about them and saw them on television. But in the end, I agreed to join the team on behalf of China-Benchmark Joint Venture.

Furthermore, at that time in the early eighties, I had a strong aversion to airplane travel. Julia, my spouse, sometimes teases me about the time we were on the way to the Sacramento airport and the hood of the car flew open. I said, “That’s it, It’s a sign. I’m not going.” We

turned around and went back to Davis.

But here I am in the Communist Party Headquarters being feted. So many bad things have happened in China during The Cultural Revolution compliments of the Communist Party, that I can’t keep myself from thinking “If something bad happens to us in this building, no one would know”—a ridiculous thought, but it occurs to me, nonetheless.

It is 1983, an era before cell phones or GPS. I would have to travel to Harbin, hours away, to call my family. The Cultural Revolution during which thousands of people were killed, imprisoned, and tortured is not an event of the distant past. That nightmare will culminate in The Tianmen Square “massacre” of student protesters in June 1989. State sponsored violence is still a reality; thus, my fantasy about the possibility of bad things



*My name in Chinese characters*



## ***I took this picture with me to China in 1983.***

happening.

But, the Zoughzhou County Communist Party officials feting us have business on their minds, not nefarious activities. Hence, the “Gan Beis.” In his blog on Navigating a Multi-Cultural Globe, Nathan Gray says about Business and Ritualistic Drinking in China:

*The importance of relationship building to the Chinese is paramount. Apparent social functions like banquets are held in very high regard by Chinese businessmen and government officials due to the ability to get to ‘know’ their potential business partners. This knowledge is achieved through watching foreign businessman’s behaviour during formal and informal drinking and eating rituals that are performed during every formal banquet. It is therefore important to be aware of these rituals, drinking strategies and how to ensure you leave the banquet in higher esteem than when you arrived.*

Gan Bei is serious business! So, we endure round after round of toasts to the “American Experts,” and round after round of Gan Beis. I hope I pass my drinking test. The Gan Beis are accompanied by a selection of delicious foods. Our Chinese hosts are no doubt expecting a glowing

evaluation report on prospects for agro-industrial projects in Zoughhou County followed by an inflow of investment money. It is the first time I remember being called an expert. I feel a fraud, for I do not regard myself as an expert.

The banquet and the spirits haunted me through the rest of the night and into the next day. It’s the second time I have gotten sick in a foreign land—the first time was in Mexico in 1966. The outdoor toilet is about 30 yards away and there’s a risk of tumbling in. It must be negotiated with great care, not easy with a hangover. When my hosts find out that I’m sick they ask, “Do you want Chinese or western medicine.”

“I want both” I respond. I get both and get better before we leave for Harbin en route to Beijing. In Harbin we stay in a 4-star hotel with a regular bathroom—shower and toilet. What a joy! At Wei Shin, our attendant, had to bring hot water from the kitchen so we could take a bath. Harbin displays the multicultural architecture of its contested past—many of its buildings are distinctly Russian from the time of the Russian occupation. We make many business and tourist stops in the city, and I buy a trove of articles to take home. From Harbin the other two team members and I board a CAAC Trident jetliner to Beijing. I am sitting beside one of the high-ranking Communist officials and wondering how I, someone with an almost morbid fear of flying, am now

flying high over China.

It turned out that the China adventure was a breakthrough for me in terms of flying. As Jason Day said about his hurt back during the 2019 Masters Golf Tournament. “My wife texted me to just suck it up and play.” If I was to be successful in my own career I would have to “suck it up and fly.” And I did.

As for the “expert” part, I was later retained as an expert witness in several lawsuits and in 2000 in Perugia, Italy, I became one of the founding members of the International Association of Experts in Agricultural and Rural Tourism. I developed and founded the Cali-

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fornia Agritourism Project which included among other useful functions, a searchable database of agritourism destinations in the state and wrote A Primer on Agritourism Enterprise Development. So, while my trip to China was not financially remunerative, it had substantial payoffs in confidence building and in learning how to “suck it up and fly.” ♦



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