

Fame Academy. Chinese style

They forgot to mention the heating. Or rather, the lack of it. Mounds of snow dotted the entrance to our hotel. The city of Kunming, they reminded me, is known as the city of Eternal Spring. I had been pleased that the *Spring Festival International Performance Competition* was to be held in the capital of the beautiful province of Yunnan. Now I wished it had been held, as originally planned, in Beijing, where despite being minus 10 degrees outdoors, it was usually 20 degrees inside.

We were a motley, nervous group of 40 foreigners, flown and bussed in to Beijing from all corners of the land or (as in my case) from abroad, then flown to Kunming. The neat cross section of nationalities from 20-odd countries- made me wonder whether it was in fact ethnicity, rather than talent, that had been the main prerequisite for entry into the Finals. There was a Korean pianist, a teacher from New Zealand, an orchestral conductor from Atlanta, the daughter of the Brazilian military attaché, a student from Kazakhstan, a postgraduate from Niger, a Malaysian pipa player and a French graduate of the Beijing Academy of Arts. I was the only British representative. All the participants had some basic knowledge of Chinese; the level of competency varied considerably.

On arrival we were first given a tour of the attractive Expo gardens next to the hotel. Centrally located was the outdoor stage where the competition would take place in ten days time, before an invited audience of several thousand. We were allocated our rooms (two per room) and handed our schedules.

The competition, now in its 7th year, is a major event in the Chinese New Year calendar, one of several sponsored by the state government. The event is managed by Beijing State TV and broadcast nationwide to an audience of 100 million or so. (It was bewildering to learn later that ITV's interview with Michael Jackson in the UK in the same week attracted a record 40 million viewers). It is one of those peculiar, elaborate, saccharin spectacles for mass consumption at which the Chinese excel. Sort of Royal Variety Show, communist (or Chinese capitalist) - style. And that peculiarly Asian interest in watching foreigners made this a particular favourite for the Chinese public. Besides, for a nation well under the sway of western influence and culture in its drive to modernise, a nation that has acknowledged that western capitalism is its economic salvation, there is an unspoken satisfaction in watching westerners parade themselves on stage in glorious celebration of traditional Chinese culture.

I had flown in from UK to offer my own contribution, an original song of several that I (a westerner) had written in Chinese. When I sent my CD of material to Beijing TV they invited me to come and perform in the finals of the competition. I had arrived entertaining the idea that the event was a celebration of an opening of Chinese culture to the modern world; a nurturing of international understanding of China, a progressive intermingling with other cultures. I soon discovered, however, that it was more a sort of perverse nostalgia trip; a highly staged, anachronistic political spectacle, a regurgitation of traditional arts through some political PR apparatus.

In the west, the idea of Pop Idol or Big Brother- style, reality TV intrusion of privacy is a relatively recent phenomenon. Here in China, such intrusion into privacy and voyeurism (in this case authoritarian) is standard fare; a convention perfected over 50 years by communist party cadres in the communes during the Cultural Revolution. Everything we did was closely monitored. By 7am each morning we had received three phone calls; one to wake us, one to check we were up and the third to tell us to go to breakfast. Our attendance at mealtimes was compulsory and recorded. We were herded onto buses and taken to the local Academy of Arts for rehearsals. The facilities and teachers were pretty good; however no-one seemed remotely aware of what the agenda was. Dozens of assistant directors buzzed around giving contradictory instructions, happier to fabricate information to appease us than dare clarify with a superior what was going

on. There appeared to be a secretive plot being hatched as to how best to allocate a performance programme between us. Thus participants were allocated routines to learn, then were told to forget those and learn others. One American had learnt six songs by the time they had settled on one. Others who had been practicing performance pieces allocated weeks ago were now asked to replace them with entirely new routines. On the third day I learnt that I would not be singing one of my own songs after all, but instead would sing a folk song with two Brazilians. I balked and told them I had been invited to come 5000 miles to sing my own material. The director reluctantly acquiesced. However, later that evening, all the contestants were gathered for a meeting in the courtyard. The director, a young, charming, steely political protégé, addressed us saying that while many of us were working hard, there were some amongst us who had not pleased him. I was asked to stand up. The stage was a large one, he said, addressing me, and the intention was for each act to be accompanied by a professional traditional dance troupe. Unfortunately, however, there were not enough to go round. I would therefore be allocated the support of four students (two Russians and two Koreans, only a smattering of Chinese between us) to serve as my backing troop. I would, he insisted, accept the dancers allocated to me without further complaint.

On day five the director wanted to check the costume I had brought with me from UK to wear during the competition. The phone rang, but I was in the bath so didn't answer it. It rang again and again, so eventually I got out to take it. 'What are you doing, not answering your calls? Have you been out of the compound?' I assured them I hadn't and that I was simply taking a bath. 'Can't you take that later? The director wants to see you now.' I explained that I was actually having the bath now. 'Tut. Well how long will you be? Can't you hurry up?' I said I would be 15 minutes. 'OK, we come in 15 minutes'. They never turned up.

I rehearsed hard, determined that my trip would at least be worthwhile in allowing me to present my piece to the best of my ability. Teacher Liu, the enthusiastic, obsequious if disorganised assistant to the director, proved an unlikely if welcome source of encouragement. Taking me aside one morning and whispered, 'Your piece is good. I believe you have a good chance of winning the first prize.' Then hurried away.

They were flying in a radio mic from Beijing especially for my number, as they had been unable to locate one in Yunnan province. I was the only contestant who would be dancing as well as singing; they had agreed early on to provide the necessary sound arrangements. We were told to treat the dress rehearsal as a proper show; there would be a live audience and it would be filmed. Besides, it would be our one chance to have a proper run-through. I was very nervous, but confident. The mic arrived only a few hours before the dress rehearsal. 'The best,' I was assured, 'its brand new'. Unfortunately none of the TV technical sound crew had any idea how to use it. I stood at the sound desk translating instructions from the English manual into Chinese in an attempt to locate the correct channel for transmission. We eventually worked it out.

That evening, half way during my performance at the dress rehearsal, the speaker piece of the 70's-style mic went flying off across the stage. I, taken by surprise, groped after it, losing my place in the song. My amateur backing dancers, having lost their lead, lost their place. For a verse and a half I struggled to replace the mic and find my place in the song. Then it was over. My one chance of a proper rehearsal.

The night of the competition arrived. An audience of over a thousand was ushered into the vast outdoor arena, bedecked with elaborate flower displays. The judging panel sat elevated on a row of plush chairs, mid-level. The contestants had been preparing since 2pm, attended to one-by-one by special makeup artists and hair stylists. After supper we were handed standard green and red full length padded Communist Party military winter coats to ensure overall uniformity, and bussed to the venue. The ladies were allocated a cold makeshift portacabin with a single light bulb and a large hole in the floor, to share with the 60-odd Chinese backing dancers. It was the coldest night so far, with frost on the concrete. One consolation was the large vats of strong spicy ginger tea put out as a sop to the cold. This was an extraordinary spectacle- hordes of foreigners

ready to offer artistic homage to their host audience, made up in elaborate, glittering, gaudy Chinese costumes, makeup and hairstyles, hovering like bees to one side of the vast ornate stage, watching with nervous excitement the arrival of the audience and the rabble of TV crews, cameras on huge roaming cranes that swept over the audience heads.

One-by-one our acts came and went. I was nervous but vaguely calm, quietly determined that I would make it work, for all the confusion. To my enormous relief it went smoothly, and the crowd seemed genuinely delighted. It had gone well; it was over.

Then, the judgements. We were made to line up and stand on stage at length in our flimsy outfits in the cold, clutching our awards and waving and smiling for the cameras. In retrospect, I should have known that the results were likely to be pre-set; it was after all in keeping with the process so far. I wasn't the only one who hadn't thought this through- most of the competitors were taken aback by the results. Adam, the student from Niger, who had entertained everyone during rehearsals because he had genuinely not been able to hold a tune, won silver. It transpired that the composer of his song was one of the judges. The French girl won gold; we learnt that her mentor along with her teacher from the Academy were both on the judging panel. The other gold prize winner was an American girl, who had been handpicked and groomed for the competition by another judging veteran, present tonight. And so it went. I and others who had no formal contact with members of the panel were given token third prizes, or nothing. I found some consolation in the fact that I received personal congratulations (and consolations) from nearly all of the contestants, who generously suggested my act was the most original and had involved the most work. Afterwards, they informally awarded me the title 'Xiao Zhongguo Madonna'- little Madonna of China. I felt in some way vindicated.

It had been eight years since I had spent any reasonable time in China. I was aware that a great deal had changed. This was an exhausting, frustrating, if bemusing reminder, that for all its flaunted and widely proclaimed progress towards modernity, China remains steeped in its own complex cultural, artistic and political idiosyncrasies, a quagmire of back-scratching, face saving, favours rendered and due. In this country, the Big Brother mentality is no one-off media publicity stunt but an accepted part of life. Nepotism is the norm. Of course, this had been a harmless talent quest, and a colourful and enriching, if exhausting, experience. But it was also a reminder to me that China's universally proclaimed transition to top position on the global stage will not be a smooth one, that its development will not be straightforward, owing to the widespread cultural complexities and ambiguities that are integral to China's past and present.

In the meantime, my pretensions at becoming a pop star in China have been firmly laid to rest.