



How I Went to
China in Search
of a Fortune
and Found
a Life

Chasing China



Mark Kitto



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a Fortune and Found a Life

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A Herman Graf Book
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For Isabel and Tristan

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Acknowledgements

Be careful what you wish for. It's a cliché, but like all clichés, it's true.

I used to daydream about ending my China career on a hillside above a tea plantation, in an old stone house with a verandah, and dogs, and a family of course. The dream was prompted by a visit to Hangzhou in the mid-nineties, a city surrounded by hills and tea plantations. I must have been reading Somerset Maugham at the time.

Today – a fair few years earlier than I expected – the dream is reality. The tea plantation is round the back of the hill, not below us, but my family and I – with two dogs and a housemaid – do live in an old stone house on a Chinese hillside, and the nearest city is Hangzhou.

For this – to me remarkable – twist of fate, I have the State Council of the Government of the People's Republic of China to thank. For all the irony, I am sincerely grateful. I hope, if or when they read this book, they will allow me to stay here.

I would like to thank the people of Moganshan for accepting me into their community. In all the years I have lived in China I have never felt so at home. Nor have I ever met such a close-knit community. I am very lucky.

I am also lucky to have a circle of friends in China and

further afield who have been generous in their support and advice during the writing of this book. Prominent amongst them and in no order as such: Adam Williams, Tess Johnston, Rena Krasno, Paul French, Jeremy Goldkorn, Alex Pearson, Nick Bonner, Bartle Bull, Grant Horsefield, Johnny Reed, Richard McGregor and John Warburton-Lee. For practical assistance with this book, including the generous contribution of photographs, I would like to thank Arthur Jones, Luo Tong, Luther Jones, Rodney Evans, Luke Cardew, Aline Shkurovich and Margaret Body. Closer to home, my wife Joanna has put up with a hell of a lot. Thank you. My thanks too to my friends who helped me through difficult times. Most of you get a mention in the pages that follow.

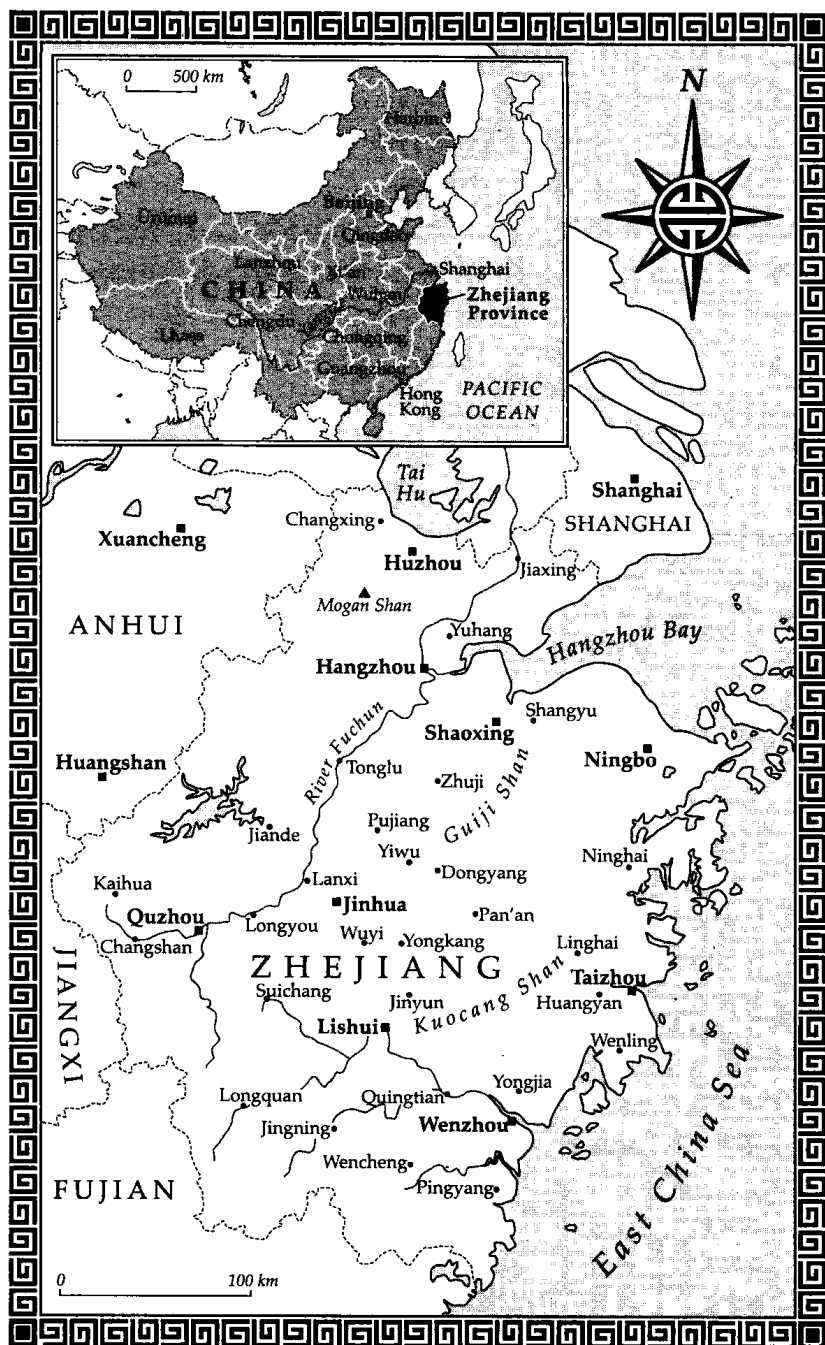
A certain Charles Blackmore has always claimed credit for setting me on my path to China. That's typical of him, and he knows what I think of the idea, but there are a few sand-grains of truth in it. So here's your acknowledgement, Charles. Thanks.

For really making it all happen, without the irony – and I do hope you read this one day – I must thank Mr Sun Xiao Feng of the Yangzhou Municipal People's Government News Office. Mr Sun, I owe you so much, and it will always be my regret that I could not repay you as we planned, back in those heady days.

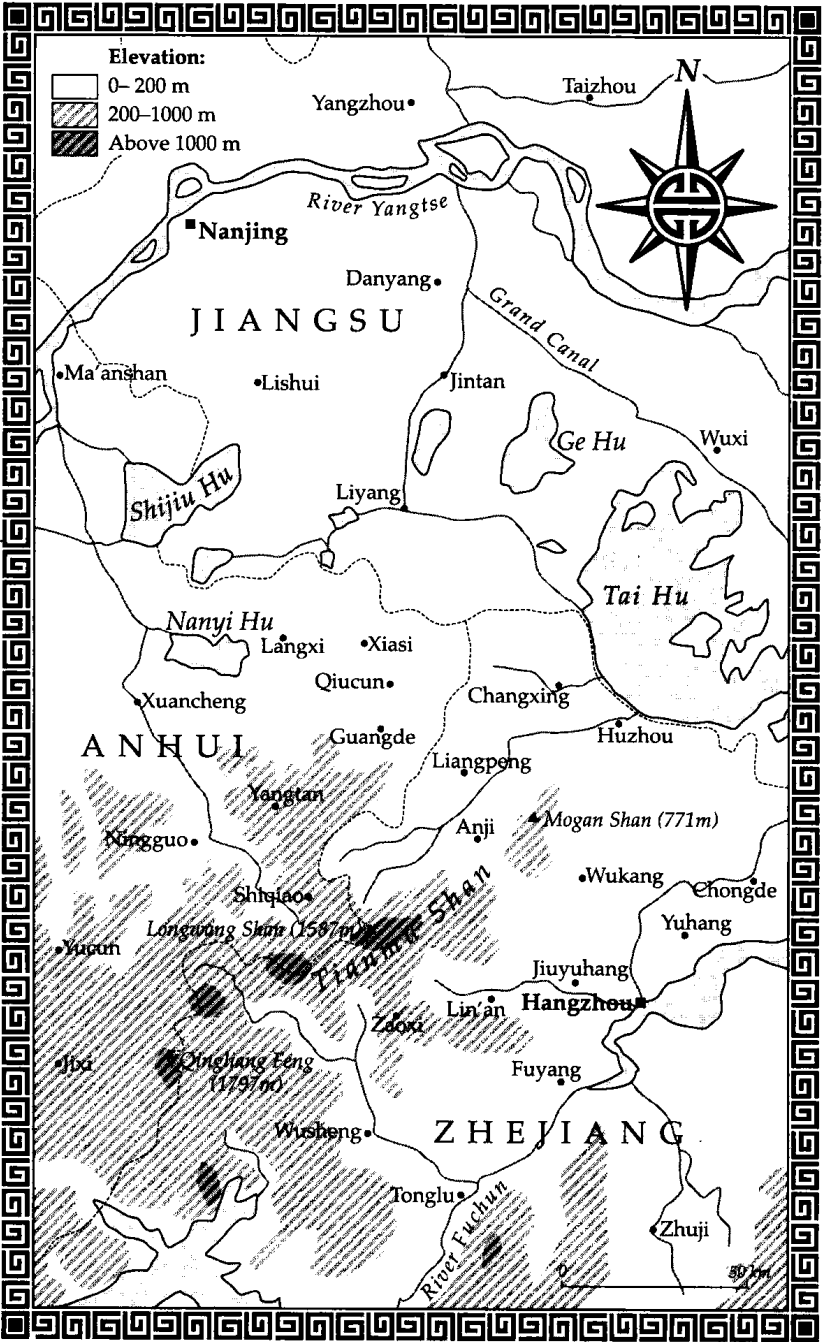
My sincere gratitude to the team at Constable & Robinson; my highly perspicacious editor Becky Hardie, also Sam Evans, Andy Hayward, and Nick Robinson, and last but by no means least, my irrepressible agent, Benython Oldfield.

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- The view from the summit of Moganshan. © *Aline Shkurovich*.
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The guest cottage. © *Rodney Evans*.
'The Lodge', the family's coffee-shop. © *Rodney Evans*.
The viewing pagoda at Sword Pond. © *Rodney Evans*.
Mr Shi's wife crosses the stream above Sword Pond. © *Rodney Evans*.
The locals of San Jiu Wu village enjoy the cool evening air. © *Aline Shkurovich*.
Mark and Joanna Kitto. *Author's photograph*.
The Kitto family outside their coffee-shop. *Author's photograph*.
Joanna Kitto's parents enjoy the shade with their grandson. *Author's photograph*.
Moganshan in its heyday, circa 1930. *Author's photograph*.
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The group of friends during a trip to Xinjiang province. *Author's photograph*.
Brent Beisher in the kitchen. *Author's photograph*.



The Zhejiang Province, shown in relation to the rest of China.



A detailed map of the Zhejiang Province.

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Chapter One

The Hans on the Hill

Another resort within easy reach of Shanghai, and one that is, let it be whispered, highly popular among honeymooning couples, is the mountain resort of Mokanshan, which seems to exercise an appeal all of its own.

*North-China Daily News Sunday Magazine, Summer
Holiday Special Issue, 14 June 1936*

The Lunar New Year is dead quiet in China, deader than a turkey on Christmas Eve. The entire vast country, the world's production house, grinds to a halt.

Like Christmas, the holiday is a family affair, and family is important in China. Everyone goes home, not back-from-work home, but real home, where grandparents live and ancestors' graves lie, possibly four days' journey by crowded train and bus. And then China stops. City streets are deserted, offices empty, building sites fall silent.

I had been in China for three years and should have known better, but the Lunar New Year in February 1999 caught me completely by surprise. All I had done for the past eight months was work. My business partner and I had moved to Shanghai to launch ourselves in magazine publishing and our

feet had not touched the ground since. Like the city itself, our business was booming, out of control. I had even spent Christmas Day at my desk. We had no time for holidays in Shanghai.

Late one cold winter evening I sat at the kitchen table in my tiny attic flat with a glass of whisky. Ten days of enforced idleness. What the hell was I going to do with myself?

Out of the blue I remembered the name Moganshan. Where I'd heard it I had no idea. I must have met someone who had been there, I supposed. The name brought to mind faded images of a neglected colonial backwater full of Western-style houses on a secluded mountaintop.

I fetched a tattered copy of the China *Lonely Planet* that the previous tenant had left on the bookshelf. I turned to the index. Moganshan was not listed.

After a painstaking search I found two short sentences tacked on to the end of 'Other Sights' in the chapter for Hangzhou, China's most popular domestic tourist city. I topped up my glass of whisky and read them slowly.

'Moganshan was developed as a resort for Europeans living in Shanghai and Hangzhou during the colonial era,' the first one said.

The second told me to get a minibus from Hangzhou West Bus Station for forty yuan, and that a double room in a hotel on the mountain might cost 250.

So Moganshan was still standing and I could get there via Hangzhou, two hours by train from Shanghai. That was enough to go on and I would have plenty of time. And it was something to do.

It was also possible I might have a companion.

Her English name was Crystal. She was Shanghainese,

tall, head-turning beautiful and I had met her a couple of days ago at the first party I ever went to in Shanghai that had nothing to do with my job. Her phone number was still in my pocket. As I lay back in bed that night I fantasized about a cosy sitting-room with a log fire in an old stone house on a wintry mountainside. It was an easy next step and a very pleasant one to paste Crystal into the picture.

On our third or fourth date, Crystal and I were both a little drunk from one too many martinis in that week's bar of the moment. It was the early hours and she had stopped off for a nightcap. Her long legs, wrapped in stretch-tight jeans, were tucked up beneath her on the thin cushions of the hardwood sofa in my sitting-room. She was wearing a white sweater, a sheepskin-lined hippie-type waistcoat and a pale pink muffler. Her cheeks were glowing from cold and alcohol. She looked gorgeous.

'Moganshan sounds interesting, don't you think?' I asked as I poured her a Bailey's, trying to sound casual yet all the time wondering frantically whether she would be going home that night. 'I mean, think of the history of the place. Wouldn't it be fascinating to see the houses where foreigners used to hang out in the old days?'

Crystal watched me with patience and a charming smirk. Why would a glossy Shanghainese want to go and dig around in an dusty old mountain village?

She took a sip of Bailey's and looked up, her eyes so desperately trying to appear neutral that they were patently mischievous. She wiped an imaginary drop of Bailey's from the corner of her mouth with a delicate finger.

'I'd love to come with you,' she said.

Before we could set off, Crystal had to perform the family

duties of the New Year Festival: eat dumplings with her parents, call on relatives and watch the Chinese equivalent of *The Sound of Music* on China Central Television One. I waited patiently, still not entirely believing my luck, and in my damp and draughty garret reread the two sentences in the *Lonely Planet*.

Three days into the marathon holiday – imagine Christmas lasting for ten days – Crystal made a break for it and met me at Shanghai South train station.

It was a cold and crisp February morning under a clear blue sky. There was nobody on the streets of Shanghai. Long stretches of the kerbside were coated red with the remains of firecrackers that had been draped over railings and let off on New Year's Eve. A longstanding ban on fireworks in the inner city had been lifted that year. The desolate roads looked like the aftermath of a bloody street battle. The silence was eerie.

After the outward calm on the streets it was a surprise to find the train station heaving with people. We were obviously not the only ones getting out of town. Leisure travel was just beginning to catch on in China, with the young at least. The station waiting room was packed with day trippers heading for Hangzhou and the city's scenic and rightly-famous West Lake.

Crystal and I were lucky to find places beside each other in a soft seat carriage. It was full of twenty-something Shanghainese, chattering loudly in the local dialect. Bags of sunflower seeds and dried fruit littered the tiny metal-framed tables. As we pulled out of the station a conductor ambled down the aisle with a trolley of soft drinks, then another who offered to book hotel rooms in Hangzhou, the next sold maps and first day covers, and finally a man appeared with

a wooden tray of nylon socks. He demonstrated the quality by scraping them with a metal brush under our noses. Muzak blared from speakers in the luggage racks.

Crystal and I ignored the din. We were too interested in each other. When I asked what her parents thought about her leaving home during the holiday, she told me they were used to her trips to Hangzhou with girlfriends. I did not press her for details.

The semi-urban sprawl that surrounds Shanghai on all sides except the sea droned past the train's grubby windows. The country is flat as a pancake. Grey clusters of farmers' cinder block houses gave way to fields of leafless mulberry bushes, green swathes of winter cabbages and bright splashes of pearl farms, the water's surface cluttered with ranks of white polystyrene floats. Scattered amongst the rural vistas enormous plots of earth had been cleared and concreted like new runways, waiting for a factory to land on them. Long strings of barges chugged along the waterways towards Shanghai, loaded so heavily with sand and gravel that their gunwales barely broke the surface above the tiny waves that splashed against them. The few barges heading up country were empty. All roads led to Shanghai. It was good to be going against the flow.

Mid-holiday Hangzhou station was utter mayhem. At the end of a dark passageway there was a row of shiny chrome exit barriers where we bottlenecked like cows passing through a branding pen. We squeezed through sideways and out into the concourse.

Unlicensed taxi drivers and hotel touts stood their ground in the middle of the human torrent. The desperation on their faces almost made you feel sorry. I brushed off a chubby middle-aged woman who was thrusting a cling film-wrapped

photograph of a dull brown bedroom in my face and we shuffled to one side. In a small eddy I pulled out the *Lonely Planet*.

'We need to find the West Bus Station,' I shouted to Crystal.

'I'll ask someone,' she replied, and glided across the stream of people towards a uniformed attendant.

'He says it's the North Bus Station for Moganshan,' she said, once she had struggled back to where I waited.

'Ah. Great start.'

'How shall we get there?' Crystal asked.

I looked at the logjam forming by the exit that led to the taxi rank. There would be no queue out there, only a scrum.

'Let's get a bus,' I suggested.

City buses are best avoided in my book and nowhere is this more true than China. But today there was no alternative. We found a bus whose driver told us he was going to the North Bus Station, he actually meant 'towards'. Half an hour later we stepped out at a crossroads in the outskirts of Hangzhou. The area looked like the suburbs of any Chinese city: broad brown streets, bicycle lanes behind knee high privet hedges and white-tiled apartment blocks surrounding dirty factories. The driver nodded up one of the empty roads.

'You need to change here for the North Station,' he said as the doors clanked shut.

We started walking. There was no sign of another bus stop. But the sun was shining and our bags were not heavy. So we kept going.

A taxi appeared from nowhere and slowed beside us. The driver gave me the hangdog hopeful look that Chinese taxi drivers practise in the mirror every morning. I looked up and down the street to confirm I had no idea where we were,

signalled him to pull over and bent down to the open passenger window. I had already made a decision.

‘How much to Moganshan?’ I asked.

He thought for a split second then replied ‘Three hundred’ without blinking.

‘Done.’

I had an urgent appointment with a fireplace fantasy.

The driver took us the long way but neither of us knew or cared. We drove out of Hangzhou on a potholed, crumbling highway, the National Route 104. Once the city was behind us small hills appeared to the west. Many were being quarried for their stone that would become the gravel that went into the barges and then the foundations of Shanghai. Some were almost completely hollowed out. The summits would only be a vague memory for the older villagers who had climbed them in their youth. I thought of the Chinese fable about the foolish old man who tried to move a mountain single-handedly because it blocked his way. According to the story, the gods were so impressed by his determination that they moved it for him. Now the god Mammon was moving the mountains of Zhejiang to Shanghai.

Forty minutes from Hangzhou we turned off the 104 on to a country road lined with sycamore trees. The road wound into the hills along a broad valley of fallow rice paddy, crisp brown in the winter sun. Farmers in padded blue cotton jackets and fur-flapped hats putted towards us on smoke-belching three-wheeled tractors that looked like easy rider motorbikes crossed with lawnmowers. They were hauling towering stacks of bamboo. The bases of the trunks formed a cab over the driver’s head while the wispy tops sashayed along the road behind. Somewhere inside the lumbering green brown mass was a trailer.

Then the valley closed in and we started climbing. I had butterflies in my stomach. We were getting close. My hopes were high but I had no idea what to expect. Perhaps we would only find ruins of the old villas, piles of rubble scattered across the hillside like Celtic stone circles. Or worse, a modern and cheesy tourist trap with a funfair beside a coach park and a cable car to the peak.

But the signs were promising. The scenery we glimpsed through the bamboo was beginning to look mountainous, remote. Green hills, ridge upon ridge of them, receded into the distance. The only signs of habitation were the small hamlets we glimpsed far below as we swept round the hairpin bends. At last the road traversed a final spur of the mountainside and we entered the village of Moganshan.

It took my breath away.

Tucked into a bowl on the side of the mountain was a European village. There was nothing fake or fabricated about it – unlike the Spanish villa complexes in the suburbs of Shanghai that look like film sets for spaghetti westerns. This was the real thing, solid and three-dimensional, as if transported stone by stone from the Alps or Provence or even North Wales, where I grew up.

A dense cluster of granite buildings under tiled and corrugated iron roofs lined a short street. More houses were scattered across the hillside, all grey stonework and sloping roofs, most of them with long verandas facing the plain below.

Apart from the Chinese characters across the walls of the hotels and restaurants, the bamboo we could see stretching away across the slopes and a single stubby pagoda perched below us, this was not China. A light dusting of snow completed the Alpine effect. Above us everything was white