



CHINA INTERCONTINENTAL PRESS

# 101

## Silly Stories from Cheerful China

### —China Daily Hotpot Column Collection





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## *Silly Stories from Cheerful China*

### *— China Daily Hotpot Column Collection*



The front cover features major contributors to the book: (clockwise) Erik Nilsson, Stuart Beaton, Xie Fang, Patrick Whiteley, Thomas Talhelm, Liu Jun, Jane Hanson and Sandra Lee.

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# Preface

“Why did you cut the punch line, ‘Revenge is a dish best served cold’?” asked Australian Patrick Whiteley, a former China Daily editor. I replied: “I just thought cold dishes are delicious, and why shouldn’t anyone like them?” Exasperated, he explained, “But in the West, ‘revenge is a dish served cold’ means to treat someone badly in retaliation.”

Oops.

It’s not an easy job to be the editor of China Daily’s “Hotpot” column. After taking the charge to keep the column alive and kicking in January 2007, I’ve learned there are many barrier reefs beneath the seemingly placid surface of the sea of English-language writing about China.

As the national English-language newspaper, China Daily has undertaken slews of reforms to engage its readership over the years. From Tuesday to Thursday for several years, the Hotpots have regularly appeared on China Daily’s page 20.

While the Hotpot column was designed to allow any good writing to be thrown into the soup — much like various tasty tidbits are tossed into the bubbling cauldron that is real hotpot — conflicting views among editors made some guidelines necessary. They should not be merely a statement of facts but, rather, ought to be written in witty, quirky and descriptive ways. Unlike the editorials in the opinion section, Hotpots should be personal — amusing experiences or thought-provoking observations of human nature and reality. The column should never offend nor poke fun at the weak and disadvantaged.

This collection features 101 of the best Hotpots among the hundreds published over the years. While many authors discussed their first impressions of transportation, shopping and traveling in this country, some also pondered cultural differences through marvelous writing riddled with rich and vivid examples. Browsing through the book, one will get the firsthand accounts of differ-



ent cultural perspectives from dozens of contributors from various corners and folds of the globe.

While sorting through stories for this collection, I came to realize that love, weddings and marriage seem to be a favorite theme. American Erik Nilsson, a quiet young man whose stories never failed to get a guffaw from us, has actually “married” — yet never “divorced” — a number of girls from various ethnic groups during his journeys throughout the country. During Christmas in 2009, he limped around the capital in a Santa suit with a fractured foot along with dozens of other Kris Kringles. While the story made me cry from laughing so hard, everyone in the office thought dear Erik truly needed a break. What a surprise it was then to read his next Hotpot that on New Year’s Day, he had hobbled on crutches cut from saplings along a cliff into a mountain-locked village in Yunnan province.

China might seem a vast, mysterious Middle Kingdom that’s overwhelming for first-time visitors. But as many of our authors have discovered, the minute one decides to walk out of the safe zone to embrace the unknown, new adventures with wonderful and weird people abound.

And as the “dish served cold” versus “cold dish” incident illustrates, there’s so much more to learn about a culture than its language. People must learn to respect others, especially those from different backgrounds, before real understanding and communication can be possible. Perhaps China Daily’s Hotpot serves as a melting pot in which our thoughts and actions boil over, enabling all of us to share our different tastes for the spice of life.

I am grateful to all the authors who have taken my suggestions seriously and rewritten their fine stories up to five or six times before this picky editor would give them the thumbs up. If you want to contribute — and are willing to put up with the fastidious editor’s endless suggestions — please drop us a line or two to [hotpot@chinadaily.com.cn](mailto:hotpot@chinadaily.com.cn).

Liu Jun  
Hotpot column editor  
China Daily

# Acknowledgements

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# I. GENERALLY SPEAKING

## 1. CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE WEIRD KIND

### 1. CEO soaks it in ---

This lighting manufacturer was hoping to make a big splash with its environmental campaign to adopt three giant pandas and make them mascots of climate-change awareness — and got a lot more than it bargained for.

The press conference was meant to be their show, but it was the Wolong Reserve park staffers who really poured it on — that is, by accidentally dumping gallons of pooled rainwater all over the company's CEO during his speech.

Despite the rainfall that has been sheeting down upon Sichuan province over the past few weeks, the media-savvy PR firm decided to hold the conference under a canopy pitched in front of the living habitat of the to-be-adopted pandas. This ensured the press could get an eye-full of the cuddly critters as they frolicked and nibbled bamboo, while government and park officials inked the adoption agreement with the CEO.

However, the canopy roof was fashioned from a tarp stretched across a flat roof frame, so that the downpour — rather than running off the roof's sides — pooled in the pockets between the grid of crossbeams.

Suddenly, all eyes were cast towards the roof, which was now a checkerboard of concave squares, in each of which the weight of the accumulated water was causing the canopy to droop.

One park staffer decided to take action and took up a long bamboo



fishnet, which for some reason was pointed on the end not used to scoop aquatic creatures from deep waters.

But rather than pushing the water up and out over the edge with the netted end, he punctured the canopy — to the English-language protests of the CEO, who yelled: “No! No! Use the other end!”

Audience members snatched up their electronic gizmos and bags and scuttled away from him in the nick of time, effectively evading the cascade.

With all participants still high and dry, things returned to normalcy. Predictable and scripted speeches proceeded as reporters furiously scribbled in their notebooks.

Then, with a sudden popping sound, the sharpened tip of the bamboo shaft ruptured downwards through another sagging square of roof from above. Unsuspecting audience members again fled to keep from getting soaked.

Apparently, a park staffer had crawled on the roof to take a stab at removing the excess water. A faint shadow could be seen from below as he stalked to and fro atop the structure, until the ominous dark spot came to pause over the square directly above the stage where the VIPs sat at a dressed-up table. The CEO had just enough time — a millisecond, it seemed — to look up and realize he was about to be hosed.

Another popping rip announced the puncture of the tarp, and gravity took its course. A small but torrential cascade splashed down atop his head, and calamity erupted among the onlookers.

Astonishment faded into laughter, and there stood the soaked CEO.

But he was determined not to let the drenching dampen his spirits, and after a few guffaws, he burst into a hearty round of *Singing in the Rain*.

I’m willing to bet that when this company decided to stage this event to expound their concern for climate problems, this wasn’t exactly one they had in mind.

ERIK NILSSON  
(July 31, 2007)

## 2. Dealing with the Devils

One of them grabbed my arms, and another seized my legs.

Then, these musclemen effortlessly picked me up and lobbed me into the back of a nearby cab.

“You,” they said, “are coming with us!”

My protests fell on deaf ears. I was being shanghaied in Beijing.

I had been out all night researching a story about the capital’s night-lifers. Beijing, it seems, is a massive metropolis with an early bedtime. But we wanted to know about its night owls who don’t give two hoots about getting the worm.

So, naturally, I approached the brawny bunch I saw swigging celebratory beer from a trophy on Gongtibeilu just before sunrise.

I wondered what this rowdy rugby team was doing. Little did I know I was dealing with the Beijing Devils. And when I found out, all hell broke loose.

Before I could even introduce myself, these hellions howled: “He’s a reporter! Let’s get him!”

And then they did.

I still have no idea what the devil possessed them to go through with their hellish abduction scheme. But I did learn that the night began with 32 teammates making good use of their half-price discount at The Den. By this point, only eight Devils were still raising hell. The last men standing boasted



of having guzzled about 15 pints topped off with four to five shots apiece.

That could explain why one of my kidnappers, who I later learned was a Welshman named Samuel John Lockyer, pulled a stunt jump and roll from the window of our taxi. This seriously confounded our cabbie, whose confusion compounded when Lockyer reentered through the other passenger door a few seconds later.

“I don’t know them. Really,” I told the driver in Chinese.

Once the remaining team members had coordinated a taxi caravan, they were off to the Goose and Duck sports pub, equipment and captive reporter in tow.

Apparently, the job of a journalist who has been nabbed by a rugby team isn’t getting usable quotes. At least, that seemed to be reflected by the uncooperative attitude of my captors. Nor is it to pull in a handsome ransom. Instead, his job is being force-fed copious amounts of beer from the team’s most recently won trophy — in this case, hailing from a 10-0 trouncing of the Beijing Aardvarks.

“The sweet taste of victory,” roared Lockyer, as he pressed the bottom lip of the trophy firmly against the bottom lip of my face.

As the sweet taste of victory spilled down my throat — and shirtfront — I began planning my escape.

But as the sun poked over the horizon, the Devils seemed to pull in their horns and became preoccupied with dancing and mock sword fighting with the pool sticks.

I grabbed my notebook, which my captors had scribbled with various profanities and obscene doodles during a game of keep-away, and headed for the door.

Once safely outside, I turned to wave goodbye to my captors, who bellowed out several farewells to “Spiderman”, which was the name they used to refer to me for most of the night for reasons only they know — if even they know.

I hailed a homebound cab. Needless to say, I didn’t know there would be hell to pay for my inquisitiveness. But apparently, in Beijing, that’s what happens when you deal with the Devils.

ERIK NILSSON  
(May 16, 2007)



### 3. Thrill of being a fugitive

They really were on a manhunt.

I hadn't realized the gusto of their pursuit of me until the day my friend Jon called me at work to tell me: "They're really looking for you, man."

But how did Jon find out that the bank was hot on my heels?

"When I went to the bank, they took me to the back room with some security guards and guys in suits. They held up security-camera pictures of you and your girlfriend, and asked me: 'Do you know these foreigners?'"

A nervous Jon said his first response to this interrogation was something to the effect of: "C'mon; just because I'm a foreigner doesn't mean I know every foreigner in Beijing."

His second response was something to the effect of: "Oh, wait. Yeah. I guess I do actually know those two."

China might be a colossal country, but it's a small world after all.

It all started a few weeks before, when my friend Jenny visited Beijing with no more than \$50 of American currency and — as she discovered — misplaced hopes of using her credit card here.

So, we had to change her US dollars into yuan, until we could figure out how to get cash from her credit card.

I provided interpretation for the exchange and, at the bank's insistence,



my mobile number in case the bank would need to reach us for any reason. After we'd spent three more days at ATMs and in banks searching for one with the alchemic capability to turn Jenny's plastic into banknotes, the bank found a reason to call. And call. And call. And call.

It was Jenny's last day in China when the bank first called claiming they'd given her 1,000 yuan (\$132) too many — a contention of which we were more than skeptical — and insisting we come down immediately to settle the matter.

I politely refused, because it was Jenny's last day and I was 20 minutes from picking up my parents, whom I hadn't seen in nine months, from the airport.

I agreed to instead meet with the bank people after my parents returned home. But whichever date I set didn't work out for one reason or another — work commitments, group outings, necessary shopping — and eventually, I wondered why I should give them any more of my precious free time. I mean, they weren't getting any money from me. I certainly never got any from them. I was just an interpreter.

But when I finally told them of my decision, they continued calling to ask when I was coming down. And the more I insisted I wasn't coming, the more they called — morning, noon and night.

This went on for months, until one day, the calls unexpectedly stopped.

Strangely enough, I found I missed the constant hounding to which I'd become accustomed. Perhaps it was the thrill of being a fugitive. I had never felt as much like Harrison Ford than I had during this period of my life.

But at the same time, I still hide my face any time I walk past that bank.

When I lived in the United States, I was always chasing the bank. But sometimes in China, I've found, the bank chases back.

ERIK NILSSON  
(July 11, 2007)