

八十一

So different today
with fine roads and schools
and ferries to Beihai
and great swimming pools
the beaches of Sanya
crowned Miss Universe
the old revolution
seemed now in reverse



Chapter 81 – Hainan Island - The Tail of the Dragon

Hainan Dao is an island province only slightly smaller than Taiwan. Shaped like a fig, Hainan sits in the South China Sea about 25 miles from the tamarind shaped Leizhou Peninsula (雷州半岛 Léizhōu Bàndǎo,) off the southern tip of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (广西壮族自治区 Guǎngxī Zhuàngzú Zìzhìqū.) 200 miles to the east of Hainan, across the Gulf of Tonkin lies Vietnam. Travel east along the China coast for 330 miles and you'll arrive in Hong Kong. Although, China sometimes refers to Hainan Island as the "Hawaii of China," it's not quite there yet. It is about the same size as all of the Hawaiian islands combined, has beautiful white sand beaches and crystal clear waters and you can swim there all year round – but the infrastructure has a way to go to catch up to Oahu. When we arrived at our 4 star hotel in Sānyà (三亚市) in the early 2000's, I was surprised to see massive numbers of 'Europeans' everywhere. It didn't take me long to realize that most of these 'Europeans' were really Russians. Signs in Russian were everywhere. There was Russian TV at the hotel and I was addressed in Russian by vendors on the street. It turns out that huge numbers of Russians come to Hainan for the beaches and tropical sun and for the medical tourism. Especially popular among the Russians was traditional Chinese medicine (acupuncture, moxibustion, and cupping.)

Hainan first became a part of China in 110 BCE during the reign of 漢武帝 Hàn Wǔ Dì in the Han Dynasty when a military garrison was set up near present day Haikou. The original inhabitants of the Island were the Li minority (黎族 Lízú) aka Hlai people, who were not happy about the invasion of their island by the Han Chinese and held onto control of the island well into the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE.) Up to that time, Hainan Island was also a place where political and intellectual enemies of the ruling Chinese elite were banished. The Han Chinese who lived on Hainan were confined to the coastal areas. During the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE,) Hainan Island became a part of Guangxi Province and large numbers of Han Chinese moved there. Later on, during the Ming Dynasty (1368 to 1644 CE,) Hainan was put under the administration of Guangdong Province.

Some of the early lures of Hainan Island were its northern bed of pearls as well as the precious gems and scented woods from the region's rich interior. Two major groups of Li people occupied the island. The Shēng Lí (生黎) were also known as the savage Li or the wild Li where the Shú Lí (熟黎) were considered to be the tame or the civilized Li. The Shu Li accepted the supremacy of the ruling Chinese and intermarried with the Han, whereas the Sheng Li continued to rebel and separate themselves from the invading Han. Like Taiwan, Hainan Island was also a haven for pirates and buccaneers and was a harbour for opium smugglers and merchants to ply their trade. As regards legitimate trade, timber became a lucrative item, especially in the Five Finger Mountain region. Hakka traders dealt in

黄花梨 Huáng huālǐ (a type of scented rosewood,) Sandal Wood, and Nánmù (楠木,) a precious wood unique to this region used for boat building, architectural woodwork, and furniture. Towards the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911 CE,) the British Navy put an end to much of the piracy in the area and foreign religious groups established churches, hospitals, schools, and orphanages. Hainan Island remained underdeveloped until well into the 20th century. It was not until Liberation in 1952 that a road was finally built intersecting the mountainous central part of the island. There is a legend from the area called Five Finger Mountain (五指山 Wǔzhǐshān). The story is that a man and his wife met a stranger on the road one day. After walking and talking with the man, the stranger presented them with a magic knife. The knife, he claimed, would make them rich . . . and it did. When an evil demon found out, however, he decided to rob and kill the couple so he could have the knife for himself. The couple learned of the plot and told their five sons who came to their rescue. Unfortunately, the sons were unsuccessful and all five sons were killed and the devil ended up with the knife. When five immortals heard the story, they went after the devil, slew him, and buried the sons in five parallel mounds. The mounds grew into hills and the hills became the Five Finger Mountains. Other stories claim that the five fingers are the fossilized fingers of a dead Li minority Chief and still another story dedicates the five mountain peaks to five Li gods.



Two events occurred in the 2000's which focused the eyes of the world on this beautiful island. The first was the mid-air collision of a U.S. Navy spy plane with an interceptor fighter from the PRC in April, 2001. According to the Chinese People's Daily, two Chinese F-8 fighter pilots were following a larger American plane flying near the coast of China, when suddenly the larger plane veered, striking one of the Chinese planes. The pilot of the Chinese fighter was killed in the incident and the American pilot of the EP-3 and his 24 man crew were forced to "violate Chinese air space." US officials claimed that the US plane was flying over international waters and that the Chinese planes swooped in twice before "clipping the leftmost propeller on the third pass." Even though permission to land was denied

by the Chinese authorities, the American aircraft was disabled and was forced to make an emergency landing on Hainan Island where the American crew were detained and interrogated by Chinese authorities for 10 days. To free the American crew, a “Letter of two sorries” was issued which was, according to US authorities “not a letter of apology” since the US had nothing to apologize for.

Mao Zedong had banned all beauty pageants in China. He called them “bourgeois nonsense” and said that participants were “lacking in self-respect.” In the early 1980’s, there were calls to “allow women to be women.” According to Dr. Louise Edwards, director of the Modern China Studies program at the University of Hong Kong, “The contemporary idea of womanhood seems to be linked to the ‘right to be beautiful and to beautify’ in China.” One of the first acknowledged beauty pageants in the PRC was the Goat City Youth Beauty Competition which happened in 1985 in Guangzhou. Even though, looks only accounted for 15% of the final decision (the other 85% relied on a knowledge of politics, literature, economics, chemistry, temperament, and Putonghua proficiency), there was still plenty of controversy. Wasn’t this bourgeois liberalism? In 1993, Beijing University women rejected beauty pageants because they “objectified women” and in 1994, the China Federation of Women declared that beauty pageants were “products of a male-dominated society.” It wasn’t until 2003 that the Chinese Communist Party officially lifted the ban on beauty pageants. This was just in time for the resort city of Sanya (三亚市 Sānyàshì), on the southern tip of Hainan Island, to host the Miss World contest. One year later, a transgender model by the name of Chen Lili applied to compete in the Chinese Miss Universe contest and was initially accepted, but that was overturned before the actual contest. According to the Shanghai Morning Post, Miss Li “seemed to outshine all the beauty queens onstage.”

