

THE REAL HEROES.

By Eamonn O'Brien

I walked along the lane leading to the Beijing Diocesan seminary with one of the priests one day last week. "That wasn't there when I came here last" I said referring to the three hillocks of mud/rubbish on the left side of the lane. (pic) "Neither was the huge crater in the ground on the right side, from which the earth had been excavated: where is vibrant community and the marvellous market they had", I asked. My friend replied: "the town has been demolished like many of the old communities and hutongs in Beijing; the families are gone, the workers are scattered across the country as in many similar situations before."

All along the road to the seminary was a construction site, a kind of coliseum all lit from below. Before my eyes, another vast expanse of the NEW modern Beijing suburbs was about to rise on a 20 acre site. Even in the darkness, the welders were still working, very high up, possibly 25 stories. We could see the sparks rising from the outline of the half-finished buildings.

Over the past ten years I have seen a gigantic construction boom in cities like Beijing with its Olympic feast of building, but also in small cities and the expanding suburbs everywhere. Highways are being hewed out of mountains, airport terminals are sprouting like mushrooms, malls are everywhere, often quite empty, conference centres and hotels are to be seen even in third-tier cities. Land is being extracted from farmers for this expansion because cities and skyscrapers are the fashion. The process that marks the end of an old community's destruction to the grand opening of the new with banners and fanfare is sometimes only a matter of months.

The television ads and glossy magazines are harbingers of this new development from slums, Hu tong, and old communities to sweeping yuppie suburbs with underground car parks and massive malls where every western luxury brand item can be bought, even diamonds.

However, there is little or no space in the Chinese media or in the minds of many for the men and women from the countryside who construct these buildings, who labour hour after hour, day after day on minimal wages, terrible working conditions, and who live in the most basic unsightly shacks that are just bulldozed when the project is over. I feel these are the real heroes, whose blood and sweat have created all the new buildings of this massive transformation of the landscape of Chinese cities and countryside that has taken place in China over the past years, including the now world famous Bird's Nest of the Olympic Village.

I have seen these workers arrive at railway stations, in groups, sometimes with their families of little children, with plastic bundles strapped to their backs holding all their possessions; (see Pic) they may have walked, cycled or hitched rides from their villages, often from houses of mud floor, trying desperately to make something of their lives, and especially for the lives of their children. I have been in a couple of villages, where the only people remaining are Grannies and Granddads and the children. The mothers and fathers, so missed by their children, but just another statistic in what has been described as the greatest internal migration in human history and contributing immensely to what will be the first economy in our globalised world in about 15 years – China.

Individually and collectively, they are heroes, the men and women who come to the cities and the old and very young who remain at home. The workers move dirt, mud, water glass, rubbish. They shovel cement and run between jobs, sometimes the women are indistinguishable from the men as they work. Their food is very simple, their features are burnt black by the searing sun, rain, humidity and pollution as they shift bricks, steel and earth, their hands are full of welts. The old who are left at home in the villages are heroes too coping with a young generation; they knew poverty prior to the 50's, now they have deep feelings of loss in their community, and uncertainty in coping with the social challenges that arise in parentless villages, but they firmly believe their grandchildren will have a better life. These families, ripped apart from each other are providing the comfortable world where the rising middle class of China live in, while they, alas, will never be able to afford it.

As I walked to language school four years ago, I had to pass what must have been the biggest building site I have ever seen. The men and women were often on the morning break as I passed. I must have been 'gawking' at them. A man, later known to me as Mr Wang, gestured me to join them, offered me a breakfast - a split pancake with a fried egg and some vegetables. On that cold morning, it was delicious and led to a similar kerbside breakfast for two weeks. We laughed, joked and gestured about our language capacity, mine in Mandarin and theirs in English was pretty low, and their dialect may not have been mandarin, but I wouldn't know the difference anyway! But we communicated- they had photos of those most dear to them, children, wives, parents and their old home towns. I had photos too of my nephews, nieces, and grandnephew. I don't think I ever convinced them that they were not my children! My gang was moved to another site, but before that Mr Wang welcomed me to visit his family in South west China.

As we had breakfast, hundreds of well-dressed passers-by rushed to their air-conditioned offices in the new national television tower or the posh multiple story buildings nearby They were dressed in their immaculate suits, shoulder bags and exuding deodorants. They sometimes slowed down, clearly bemused at this strange seen, some laughing, maybe scoffing, disapproval. I often reflected on both groups: the workers, whose labour was taken for granted and whose names would be written out of history, except in the hearts of their dear ones. It must have been, I thought, like the labourers who build the Cathedrals of Europe or 'won the West' in the great American adventure. For many of the yuppies passing by on the street, and their glitzy media culture, their QQ internet exchanges, silvery computer screens and rolling images of a vibrant blonde young Marilyn Munroe, there is no place for Mr Wang and his fellow manual workers in the Chinese dream. These latter are seen by many as dirty, uneducated peasants, to be avoided and even feared for what they might do to you. So often, I was advised: ' don't be on the street after dark with those people' Recently, I had a retreat in Worth Abbey, where I was informed that the architect chartered to redesign the Abbey

Chapel was also the one who designed the UK Centre at the Shanghai Expo 2010. (See Pic) Tens of millions of people went to the Shanghai Exhibition. The local and the international press marvelled at the buildings, and praised to sky's all their foreign designers, but I scarcely saw a word about the real heroes and their families at home, who constructed these marvels. Their lives were broken in the making of this exhibition Centre and every urban sprawl all over China. But despite the immense challenges to the workers and their families, lives were made also in small way – a builder's pay packet going to village regularly, assurances of a child's education, payment for medicine, a small shop serving the village, or the best house in the area.

The empty rhetoric about the place of workers in this society is being named as bogus by many. The indomitable spirit of Mr Wang and his colleagues are playing their part in that process. With them I pray that in the very near future they will fully 'reap what they sow' and enjoy the fruits of what their human hand have made'. Now the pain is more evident and the gains are simple such as those listed. But deep inside them I sense an unquenchable will which will prevail, matched by widespread evidence of intent. It was well illustrated by the father of Mr Wang and his village mates when I visited them and heard their story of how they manoeuvred in their hostile environment over the past 30 years. After a wonderful time with them, their resilience was admirably summed up in the final goodbye of Mr Wang's father. He was brought up in the French Catholic tradition and he bid me good bye in French with a determined twinkle in his eight five year old eye: 'all the best Fr O'Brien, I have been the CATHOLIC party secretary of the Communist party of this village for 30 years: Long live Catholicism!'

End: August 11, 2011.