

*“Everybody has their taste in noises as well as other matters; and sounds are quite innocuous or most distressing by their sort rather than their quantity.”*

*Jane Austen, Persuasion*

I’ve just returned to France after a very enjoyable couple of weeks at home. One of the many pleasures I relished, whilst there, was the quiet of the countryside. I lived in Dublin for years, though I can’t say I remember much about those city sounds. Other than the occasional car alarm, that refused to stop, they never really bothered me. Surprising really, considering the fact that I grew up in the quiet surrounds of Ardmayle. Although, as children, we really enjoyed staying with our very lovely aunt, the late Catherine Moloney. She lived in Clonmel, and I remember finding the town sounds so excitingly unfamiliar, particularly at night. All these years later, when I stay somewhere unfamiliar, the slightest sound can unexpectedly carry me back to those happy times.

I’m now living in Paris, an urban setting which is certainly noisy, but it pales into auditory insignificance when compared to China. My Chinese adventure brought me to Changzhou, a city of five million people, give or take. So, of course, it was going to be noisy. I was surprised, though, by how much the urban soundtrack grated on my nerves; traffic, car and scooter horns, music, lots and lots of people, fireworks and an extraordinary volume of audible advertising. There was absolutely no escape. On the bus, morning and evening, there was one particular piece of music or different television or radio programme playing. I loved the music, although I never managed to establish what it was or who composed it. It was very relaxing and I’m disappointed to realise that I can no longer play it in my head. More difficult to forget is the loud automated alert to the different stops that punctuated journeys. It also jolted sleepy commuters, which was handy, as there were many sleepy heads on the bus of an average morning. The Chinese seemed to love a good snooze.

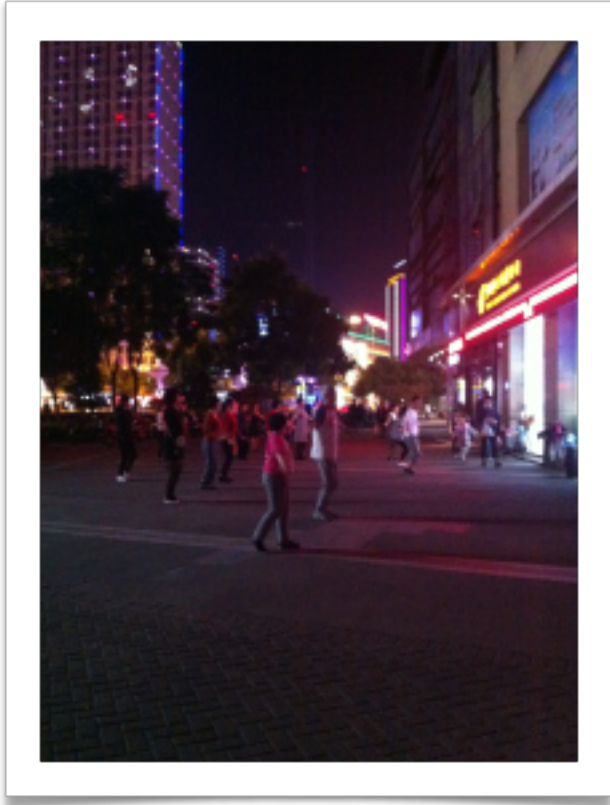


Celebrations, by their nature, tend to be noisy affairs. In China they always took the same form—fireworks. The slightest bit of good news and off went the snap, crackle and pop. I was woken by their sound before 8 a.m. most weekends. The consolation was the relief that I wasn't actually in a war zone, which remained my default wake-up fear throughout my time there. It was nice too to think that somebody, somewhere, was happy about something. I'm a whole lot more magnanimous about this as I type my memories than I used to be when the 'fire alarm' put paid to my lie-in.



Another Chinese aural attack I disliked was incredibly loud music being piped out of shops, onto the street. Within the shop, at a reasonable volume, I quite enjoy a tune, but out onto the street? Staff stood outside shops with microphones too, trying to encourage punters to come inside. I mean I assume that's what they were doing, no idea what they were actually saying.

ATM booths were in the vestibules of all the banks and shopping centres and being trapped in one of them, with a voice repeating God only knows what, for the duration of a withdrawal, was very irritating. But the supermarket was the place I found most difficult. At practically every turn a tannoy repeated the special offer of that section. Short and shrill, over and over. It's hard to describe how annoying that was but it resulted in lightning quick shopping and several regrettable purchases. Bread, with dried fish hidden inside, was a particularly unpleasant lowlight. If you're ever tempted, don't, it's not good.



I was selective in my disdain for the noise pollution though. Every evening, after dinner, groups gathered to exercise on practically every street corner and loud music accompanied the aerobics and dancing. People have apparently tried to stop this growing, noisy practice. I hear their cry but loved the aerobics and thought it was really social.

China is the world's most populous country – estimated at 1,386,572,259 people. That's 18.47% of the world's population hanging out, and, of course, people talk. To my ignorant ear the tone of the Mandarin language is such that people appear to be shouting and scolding, even when they're just shooting the breeze. Maybe because I didn't understand, or because I found the tones harsh, the chatter seemed invasive and it was hard to listen to.

Almost two years later it's a fading memory. I walked the Nodstown road last week and it was so calm and peaceful that, back in Paris, the police sirens and passing traffic seem louder now. Níl aon tinteán mar do thinteán féin is dócha.

Una Ni Mhaoldhomhnaigh