

A Postcard from the Middle Kingdom

Interview with Thomas Brandt on his recently published Coffee Table Book
“China in Those Days”



Mr. Brandt, when did you write your last Postcard?

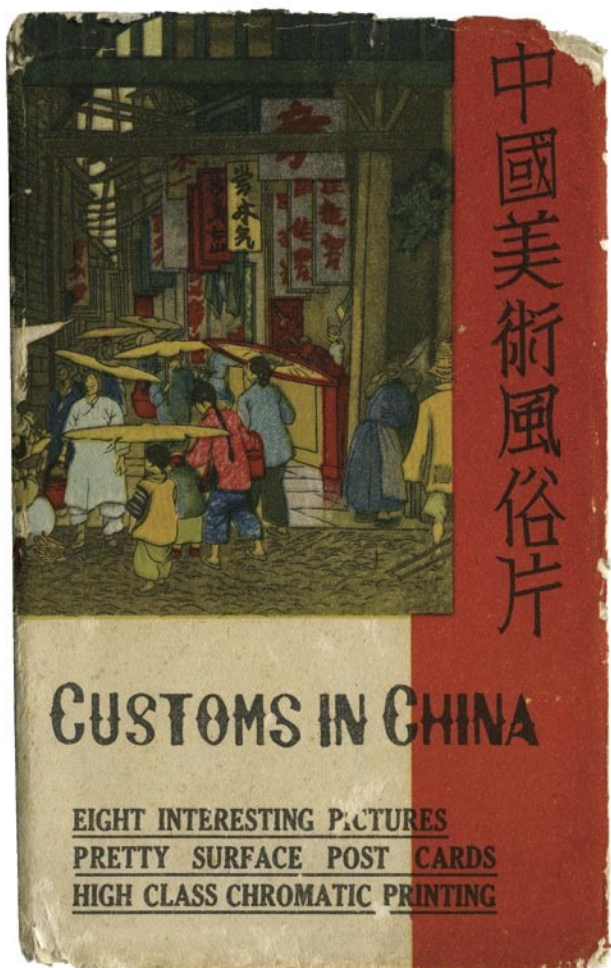
This might be well about 20 years ago. At then it was still exiting, they were first “sms”, short message services – so to say, usually greetings from a holiday towards Grandma and first love messages to someone expressed just between the lines.

How did you got the Idea, to Collect Postcards and Particular Postcards to China?

When purchasing some historical postcards for my previous book “Asia in Those Days”, one card displayed Singapore’s famous “Orchad Road” as a tree-lined path with a Ochsenkarren. The differences of then and now and to find other today to me know locations in Asia on these over 100-years old tiny postcards was fascinating. It in fact became the start of a Leidenschaft, which came closed to an addiction and ended into a real “craze” over the last 15 years: the collection of postcards on Asia.



In 1908 about 860 Million postcards were send out into the world, a number equalling today's sms-sendings. Sms in fact stands for “Short message Service” and after inventing the first postcard by the Ungarian Herrmann in 1869 postcards became the fashionable and trendy communication tool in the early 1900s.



Where did you find the Postcards, where could you buy and collect the Historical Postcards?

During the first years I purchase the major European postcard traders "empty". Several times for instance I travelled to France and Italy and visited the largest postcard traders at times before Asia and especially China became a major focus. At then I was still lucky to be able to purchase larger collections on Asia "en block", sometimes up to several hundred cards. For these traders at then and now it is more important to purchase cards then to sell them, as there are no large numbers available and once the stock is sold the shelves empty again. Old postcards on Asia are specifically rare, only a very few exist and none of them in Asia, due to the early majority of production in Europe and due to the extreme humidity in Asia, in which no paper survives for a longer period of time. Further postcards were send by Europeans from Asia towards families and friends to Europe or brought in larger leather-albums to Europe. Today Asians start to discover the art markets and to collect, and this goes especially for China, where stamp and postcard collections had to be burned publicly on the street during the times of the Cultural Revolution, when collecting these items was forbidden. After the opening in the 1970s the Leidenschaft of collection experienced a renaissance and emerged again. 1982 a Chinese philatelic association was re-founded and unites today 400,000 stamp collectors, with the overall number of stamp collectors estimated at about 6 Million Chinese.



What is special with these postcards?

Postcards revolutionized – they brought the world a little closer.

More than 100 years ago postcards revolutionized the world's communication. With a totally different set of values in society at the time, written communication was basically intransparent and a closed matter. Hence postcard, all of a sudden, practices an absolutely open communication, with messages readable for anyone. Photographie, (Skype) Telecons, TV, Internet as a widely practiced far-away were not existent at the time. One did not know anything or much on what happened on the other side of the world, or even how people, towns and the nature looked on the other side of the world. Hence the "Golden Age of the Postcards" from 1900-1914 initiated the first ever sending of pictorial images in the world on a wider scale and brought the world a little closer.



Durch Postkarten: Reisefieber und Interesse an fernen Ländern

Reisen waren damals noch etwas besonderes und nur wenige konnten sich den Luxus leisten oder waren beruflich in der Lage dazu. Kenntnisse über andere Teile der Welt waren zudem kaum vorhanden. Postkarten informieren, bildeten und weckten Interesse, in fremde Regionen zu reisen.

Communication at the time had other dimensions!

We are looking at a time, when the waiting for the arrival of a hand-written postcard or letter came along with a great excitement, when ships transported the news of the seas, and from time to time one of them sunk to the ground with all the mail. With still long sending and travel times the tropical humanity and salty sea



water washed out the ink writings and messages became unreadable. At the time postcards and letters were still written by hand (!) and one had to have laid out and well-structured his or her thoughts on what to write before inking on the paper. Hence circumstances were far away from today's "Cyberage" and one was not jumping up and down, when the server is down for half an hour and the inbox was not marking the dearly expected message in red colour. At the time the day way towards the letter box was still exciting, different to today, where one isn't much looking forward to this expecting numbers of undemanded junk mails, and unfavorable invoices in it.

The tiny postcards (measuring 9 x 14 instead of today's 10 x 15 cm) were communication tool for traders, missionaries and other China travellers or "expats" of the time to supply family members and closest friends with news and signs of life from far away.



Asia at then was still far and Travelling was Extraordinarily.

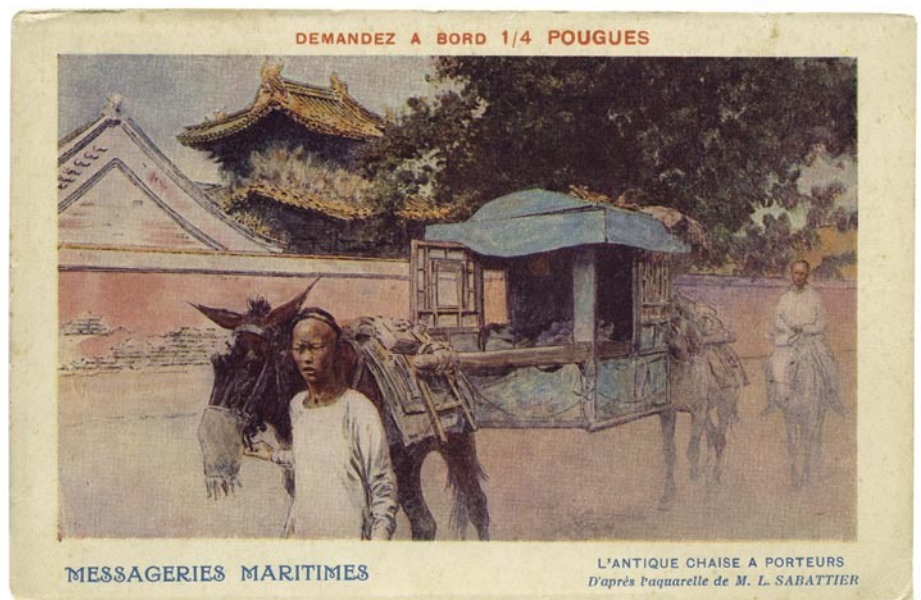
Travelling times of post were extremely long at then and likewise the journeys of people over the seas took place in a very different manner before the introduction of the Linienfliegen scheduled flights. The travel over the seas was still a real challenge at then. When frequently hearing today's complaints about the long flights to Asia, untasty food served and stewardesses' lack of a permanent smile and absence of service mentality on the 12-hour flight, the hardships during the 12 to 15 months long sea-journey in the 16th and 17th century were totally different! The space was shared with further 350, mostly un-showed male passengers from the begin of the journey. Many of them were adventurers, runaway, criminals and convicts of the societies at then, who had no work and existence and became recruits hired on day or trip basis (Tagelohner). Every third person was getting sick during the journey, one of ten died and was thrown overboard right away, awaited by sharks. Only the "better ones" were equipped with a canon ball around the leg, to have a fair chance to sink quick and reach

uneaten the bottom of the sea. Days-long typhoons and waves larger than the ship and with power to break the ships masts to end the journey and the overall investment within seconds were threats on the daily agenda.

Hence it might be a wise exercise to remember our forefather once upon a time with a bit of recognition and the next trip to Asia with all the little "buts" becomes a single pleasure and enjoyment trip.



Many of the early steam shipping lines earned significant financial income by transport of mail and their former names of "Messagerine Maritime" and "P & O Steamer" are still today prove of this.





Germany: World's largest Postcard Producer in the early 1900s

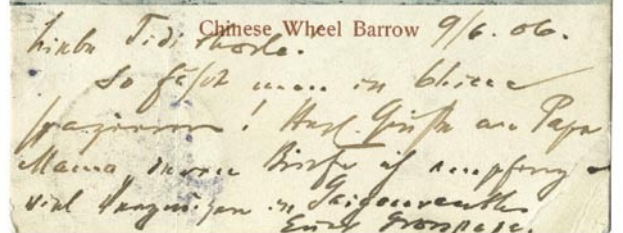
Due to the supremacy in the printing industry Germany was leading the world's postcard production in the early 1900s and producing in times up to three quarters of the tiny postcards. Leipzig, Dresden and Berlin were the strongholds and there were about 25 large postcard producers as 10 manufacturers specialized in making most exclusive leder albums, in which up to 600 postcards were kept. In the year 1900 about 1 Million postcards were produced by 30.000 workers in Germany, in the following decade the so called "Golden Age of the Postcards", the industry became a very important employer for thousands of employees in the printing industry, of designer, painter and salesman around the world. With the World War 1 in 1914 came the end of "Golden Postcard Age" and following the two wars a new media era with films, cinema, radio, TV emerged, hence postcards loosing attraction and attention.



During the early years the motives were photographed and taken, f.i. in Shanghai, and the development and card production still took place in Germany in Europe. The postcards were then shipped to China, where German traders sold them mainly to Expats, who scribbled with pencils or inked their life experiences in the tropical east to their families and friends at home.



Around 1900 many cards were still hand-colored and hence secured employment for a large industry. And even though even Adobe Photoshop Software was not even imagined yet, a remarkable creativity in creating cards was already in existence, as shown by the two postcards.





Pictural Views were the New Feature

Next to the news on the cards the pictorial views were very important, they were much attracting and fostered the collection craze and hence the sales. At then, an attractive lady was not attracted by “would you like to view my stamp collection” but it was the postcards at then, who made the difference and was the starting point for a first home invitation. Holidays were directed to location where attractive postcards were on sale and a location visit was only proven after a postcard sent. One or the other attractive location was left right away after the postcards were sent, before the known mountain in fact has been climbed or the cathedral even been entered.

The Book Title shows a Teahouse in Shanghai. Was there any Special Intention to Choose this View?

Already at then Shanghai's Teahouse was a very famous and popular motive for postcards, as today it was already a known tourist attraction. That the same teahouse is by chance and due to the sister city relationship between Shanghai and Hamburg currently been re-built in Hamburg is a pure coincidence. Hamburg in fact received the Teahouse model worth 9 Mill Euro as a gift from Shanghai and has given a most attractive prime location at Hamburg Rothenbaum to the Chinese investor.



Shanghai's Yuyuan Teahouse is most probably the most popular in the middle kingdom, and in those days and today alike a favourite photo and postcard motive. The bridge leading towards the teahouse was built in a zick-zack style to avoid ghosts and unwanted spirits nearing as these were only able to move straight.





The exclusive book “China in Those Days” in fact should not be classified as a “Coffee Table Book”, but categorized as a “Teahouse Book”. Like the early traditional Coffee Houses in early Europe, teahouses were locations, where one was introduced to each other in a neutral environment and where business was developed and mediated as conflicts were settled. After the American-style coffee chains have gained an immense popularity around the globe in recent years, likewise the famous teahouse culture experiences a major renaissance in popularity.

A book Chapter Focuses on the Early Chinoiserie Development in the 17th Century? **The Europe in the 17th and 18th century: Crazy on China!**

This China-oriented mindset in early Europe originated from France and was interested in “Everything Chinese.” Valuable silk, porcelain, tea but also Chinese architecture and garden landscaping were much attracting the western world. Chinese philosophers and philosophies were read in medieval Europe, the Chinese society had an image as highly civilized. Many remains of this period are still today visible in the heritage of gardens and architecture, such as the Chinese Tower in the park in Munich and uncountable other park pavilions. Reputable castles (Schloesser) of the aristocrats (Adel) were regarded as incomplete if they had not at least one room decorated in Chinese style, at that time a must for the ‘well offs’ elite.





The German and European trader were already heavily engaged in Business exchange with China at time of the cards around 1900.

Yes, the early economic activity is especially interesting with view on the recent euphoric, in parts over-euphoric China fever during the recent years, as these euphoric waves and interest on the mainland existed already several centuries ago. The early trade exchange with the mainland together with the strong work power of the Chinese overseas shipped into the colonized countries, especially in South East Asia, contributed significantly to the waves of industrialisation in Europe and the world during the 18th and 19th century.



Was Doing Business at that time more Difficult or Easier, did it follow Different Rules?

In principle not, but the frequency and the problems in conducting business were different by nature, for instance difficulties appeared more dominantly in communication, transport and logistics and in payment modes. If one looks today with excitement on the development of exchange rates, at then the majority of goods were bartered and not paid in cash and two dozen of different currencies existed brought along by the Europeans and other incomers. The later had to find out that Chinese and other Asiatic business partners were not interested at all in their currencies and their coins with unseen people in uniforms and most strange looking faces on it.





Requires the Middle Kingdom a Different Manager type to reach Success in Business?

Although business with China even today challenges a lot and requires a certain character type, at the time of these postcards a stronger adventure ship and “to put up ones’ sleeves” was required. And even though the invent of steamships since mid of the 19th century and the 1869 opened Suez Canal shortened the travelling times significant, the frequencies of trades exchange and the expectancies on both ends were still very different. Meanwhile the world has move closer together and communication and exchange have become rather convenient, but in spite of that Stubenhocker and bureaucratic desk-oriented manager are still the wrong choice, if the chances in China business should be taken on at its best, then and now. Bureaucratic office workers and the typical “Airline-up-grad fetishists” are certainly also today the wrong choice, to develop a success story in China and Asia.

Would you give us your Stand of View regarding the often Critical Future Scenarios on China?

If seen before a background of history, a united China, after year thousands of danger from “the outside”, has “only” to face and master the challenges from the inside. This is a common fact, which is also applicable for the other state s with large territory such as Indonesia, Russia, and Brazil etc., were the acute problems to be mastered result from the immense size and inner.

I am not a believer of the horror scenarios painting futurious macroeconomic crises, larger immigration waves of people and environmental disasters, by which many prophets look out to position themselves. These crises were in China already part of the daily agenda, since millennia’s by the way. And they will always occur, but would not drift the vast country away from its path.

And different to many other countries has China a factor, on which many other countries have reason to be jealous on: its extraordinary disciplined working people. This micro perspective bringing the individual into play as decisive factor and making up quasi 1,3 billion motor of the country, cannot be overlooked. As long as a

moderate, even though small rate of growth is reached, the individual will feel this and realized that he is better off, can afford a better education for the children etc. When looking back into history, social tensions through emigrations towards into the towns in booming periods as natural catastrophes a fixed part of the country’s history path. Next to it “The Chinese” is a rather un-political character and at first and foremost individually oriented, focussed on the family, his children etc.



Missiën van Scheut : China. De jonge watervoerder.

Hardly any other country could count on such disciplined and workable individuals as China could rely on. Even the often euphoric forecasted India is to be defined more on the other end of the scale with view on type of people (Menschenschlag), working attitude and discipline, India in generally is in the middle of a public and economic interest but I personally would like to reduce this euphoric view and classify India on the long term into a category together with a few other emerging countries such as Brasil and Indonesia. In this group of countries the existent climate and religions have “spoiled” the people and their mentality and people have not been grown up over year thousands in permanent hardships and dangers fighting for survival such as in the mainland. Likewise the thinking, mentality, planning horizon, inventors mind and the overall survival instinct was not trained in such a way and has resulted into other mentalities. The rising middle class promises in these countries a great potential but the rather different mentalities and mindsets cause big differences to the middle kingdom.





And today Copyright Violations are still on the Daily Agenda?

Certainly today's IPP discussion is, which is too quickly associated to Chinas' copyright violation needs to be put into a different light. At first it's important to know if looking at the long history path that it is China that is the benchmarking inventors' nation of the world. Paper, ink, the book and book printing, paper money, firework and shooting powder, the first rocket, the compass, abacus as the first counting instrument, the clock and even spaghetti were invented in China. A special and rather unknown aspect is that Chinese put out written rules, to hinder that a major invention of theirs, the Armbrust, was brought out to of the country to enemies. After using thousands of year's arrow and bow, the Armbrust was a major invention for the country and in general for the weaponry history and under no circumstances was meant to reach foreign invaders. Hence about 2000 years ago (!) written rules and harsh death penalties were announced to hinder this, in China!



In spite of your Title “China in those Days” the Book Focuses as well on the Role of the Overseas Chinese “China Offshore”: A hardly usually overlooked World Power

The entire world's attention was focussed during recent years on the tremendous rise of mainland China, a rise which might be the world's ever most relevant rise of a single nation in short time, as well in terms of impact on the global community. Likewise the role of the Chinese Overseas was hardly noted. “China Offshore” unites a complex power without country borders and national flag and comes along with financial sources as financial power surpassing even those of the mainland. Overseas Chinese dominate major world regions, among them many parts of South East Asia, and they can rely on an intransparent and very unique overseas network, which goes far beyond Asia. As they also keep their relations and networks with their or their predecessors' former home regions in China, the Chinese Overseas gain over proportion from the current rise and the booming mainland.

China lost until the end of the 19th century about 5 to 7 Million inhabitants, which – in spite of existing death penalties by the emperor in the north of the country – took chances in the southern provinces and sojourned over the seas towards a new future. Poor peasants and adventurers sold their work future off against a ship ticket into the unknown (Ungewissheit) and without any knowledge or preparation on their destiny. The cheap labourers, commonly also called “coolies”, were poor Chinese, which in fact fled a number of life threatening rebellions and natural disasters in southern China. The majority immigrated towards the closer South East Asia, where the colonial economies, and especially the plantation and tin mines were in strong need of labour, on the other end this promised income and a future for the sojourners.



Heute: Chinesen-Expats aus Suedostasien
Heute dreht sich das Blatt: Internationale Beratungsunternehmen, Banken und andere rekrutieren die chinesisch-sprechenden Nachfahren der fruhen Haendler, „cheap laborers“ und Lastentraeger, „coolies“ zurueck. Mit zig-fachen Gehaeltern rekrutieren sie quasi den suedostasiatischen Markt leer und werben gut qualifizierte, it-orientierte, englisch-sprechende und die recht Arbeitsgeber-loyalen „Chinese-Expats“ zurueck ins Reich der Mitte.

The Chinese Century or a significant Chinese Future has just begun, which Influences could be expect?



Chinesen planen ihren Tag um die Mahlzeiten herum, was die Wichtigkeit des Essens anzeigt. Nicht nur Tee, sondern auch viele Zutaten, darunter Gewürze und Kräuter waren früherer Medizinern im Reich der Mitte. Selbst heute zielt die chinesische Quisine im Wesentlichen darauf auf eine harmonische und ausgeglichene Nahrungszubereitung- und -Aufnahme.

We are about to face many good developments, some of them are already visible around us, among them the Chinese Vorliebe love of food. Remarkable is, that even very usual Chinese people have much more knowledge on the nutrition and effects of food on the bodies organs and all over well being that the normal consumer in the western world.

But also a well-balanced body harmony through exercising for instance of Tai Chi, Qigong or Sword Dance and other "mind & body" stress-reducing exercises are part of it. In a world of more and more stressful course of life it become more necessary and likewise popular, to have preventive exercises to avoid unbalances and a possible stress collapse.

Chopsticks are a further Chinese invention, which is thousands of years old, when one got the idea to use twicks from a tree (Baumzweig) to fish out food out of boiling water without burings ones' hands. The method presumes, that food ingredients are prepared into mouth-fitting pieces when cooked, certainly not a bad idea if compared to plate-sized steaks in the western world. 60,000 employees are occupied in the middle kingdom to produce 60 Million (one time used) chopsticks, most of which are used one time, out of which about 15 Mill are exported. For this 25 Mill trees are used per year, a critical fact which brings the increasing one-time-use of wooden chopsticks with the climbing standard of living into a critical light and plastic chopstick with multiple-usage are favoured therefore in the discussions.





Early Missionary Work in China

For long Missionaries dominated western activity in China. Still before the trader and merchants missionaries became the early discoverers in China. In the second half of the 13th century religious orders and the pope sent missionaries into the middle kingdom, which initiated a frequent exchange between Peking and Rome. This was followed later by times, in which the missionaries were regarded as barbarians due to the origin, their work and their absolutely strange outlooks with long beards etc. In times there were followed due to the conversion works which lead even to revolts like the Taiping and the Boxer rebellion. At times of strong western military and power presence the missionaries were gaining again to reach privileges, concession to buy land to built churches and freely conduct the conversion works. At then built huge churches again contributed to the missionaries' image and helped them to impress and convince the potential followers.

Missionaries performed their works in the most outskirt regions, as in today's Mongolia. Education and school teachings, social works for the poor, for blind people and children, as the support in the agricultural to ensure harvests were some of their works to ensure and reach larger numbers of converts to "the right believes". Over long periods the prayers were, together with other foreigners, seen critical as barbarians by Chinese officials and the ordinary. Chinese regarded themselves as being in the centre of the world and these strange looking people must come from most strange part of the outer peripheral world.

If the work of the early missionaries and merchants is looked at, it seems as rather surprising that one or the other today thinks he has invented the world "globalisation" anew, it being since centuries already a common principle of our predecessor and former generations.



Some Postcards do reflect the Colonial Perspective of the time?



Just a very motives display the contemporary thoughts, also the national European perspectives, to venture and to cut the far-away-world, and as well China, into spheres of their influences. The Germans were not to that extend a colonial like England and France in China, and they came to late as well. But the French and the Germans try to follow the British as the early and most relevant China pioneers in terms of trading and they were trying to develop their "own Hong Kong". The French developed over the possessions in Indochina their interests towards southern China and the Germans were, much later, about to secure their concessions in Kiautschou, the formerly known Tsingtau.





The Germans came “late” in their efforts to also secure their piece of China to compete with the other imperialist nations and to follow the British example of their stronghold Hong Kong. But the best located regions in southern China, with direct proximity to European and shortest sailing distance, had already been taken by the British and the French. They settled down in Kiautschoo, the former town Tsingtau, today’s Quingdao, and built a settlement in perfect German ways, architecture etc. Schools, hospitals, a usual post systems and a typical German architecture became part of it. Punctual at 12 noon a canon shot was fired so that the inhabitants of Tsingtau could right adjust their watches, German forest were planted with imported trees like the German cows “Allgaeuer” and the more resistant “Ostfriesen” were imported into the settlement. The German built “Heidelberg” became to one of the most popular tourist attractions on the sea side in the middle kingdom.



The Collection has a Significant Historic Value, what are your Further Plans with it?

For the moment I take a bit of rest and try to “adjust back into normal life”, for instance just to rest on an evening or on a free weekend without pressure and bad Gewissen. The later is a seldom moment as my work life is extremely demanding, as well in terms of time, as it is still usual that every incoming German business men or delegation to Asia is wie selbstverstaendlich expecting that we are also “available” on a weekend. IN Germany nobody would dear to ask for a weekend business appointment today. Hence the recent years and recent month were extremely challenging to write this book aside of my real profession during every free minute in evenings, weekends and during vacations and at the same time pre-market the book.

Meanwhile there are many requests of inquiries and ideas for exhibitions, possible (travelling-) exhibitions, and a presentation is also under preparation.

A further Personal Remark on the Project?

In spite of all the stress committed to and self-restricted life during the recent many months I would not like to miss the recent period. The yearlong work on a self-chosen topic were a fascinating hobby and programme of self-education at once. During the works I have met many interesting people, among them collectors, researcher and scientists, academics and entrepreneurs from various fields, which I would not have met in my normal work life. The time therefore will remain etched in my memory.

