

Inside Stories: The Middle Kingdom View Transcript

Scott Simmie: 你好。 Oh, okay. [foreign language] Inside Stories.

Scott Simmie: Today on Inside Stories, we cross 12 time zones to speak with Bill Siggins. He's an expatriate living in Beijing, whom I met a very long time ago when I was also living in the Chinese capital. We became friends and though we only see each other maybe once in five years, we've still got a great friendship. Bill, thank you for joining us.

Bill: You're welcome Scotty. And it's really good to see you and to hear from you.

Scott Simmie: Very good. Awesome. How long have you been living in China, Bill? I honestly have forgotten.

Bill: Okay, I need to do a little calculation or I could tell you what I tell Chinese people when they ask me that, that's always gets a shock from them. I say, "I've been here, oh, a 100 years." And then the next question is, "Oh, really? How old are you?" "Well, I'm [foreign language 00:01:21], I'm 137." And then they know, most people know that I'm kidding. But Scotty, I came here, it was, what was it? It was 34 years ago, right? I was here a year before you came actually, and we camped out at the [foreign language 00:01:41], the Friendship Hotel in Beijing.

Scott Simmie: What appealed to you initially about China? Why did you go there in the first place?

Bill: Well, I'd been working in Ottawa as a journalist for quite a long time and I just, I felt like I needed a break. And I was going to take a sabbatical, one year, and now look where I am. And to be clear Scotty, I haven't been here for 34 years, right. I left China after my third year when we all made a hasty retreat at [foreign language 00:02:15], June 4th in the Tiananmen Square incident. So, it was in 1989 that I returned to Canada and lived in Saskatchewan. And I brought my beautiful Chinese wife Fom Fung with me to Canada.

Bill: And we landed in Regina, Saskatchewan, and built a life there. We built a really nice life with the help of my sister, Maggie, and family there. But, Foh Mung I guess got the little bit homesick and I was also interested in seeing how China had just zoomed ahead in its development from the time that I left in '89 to just before the Olympics. So in 2007, we decamped again from Canada and set up in Beijing again, and worked on the Olympics in 2008.

Scott Simmie: Is that why you returned, to work on the Olympics? Or were you deciding then, that you were going back to live for the long-term?

Bill: Well, I know that Foh Mung had done well in Canada, but she certainly missed... My wife had certainly missed being in China. And China seemed very interesting, extremely interesting at that time. I mean, it was just before the Olympics and so much was happening and we thought, it could be a very interesting time to see what we can achieve in that period around the Olympics and it was an extremely interesting time. I remember meeting you here, you came with the star to do some recording and reporting on the Olympics.

Scott Simmie: When I was back there in 2008, I remember being both impressed with all the new stuff, but I also missed some of the old, older, really quaint aspects of Beijing that these hutongs, these really lovely, quaint alleyways. That many of those were gone to make way for new construction. You've seen all these changes. What's it been like for you?

Bill: Beijing, was very interesting when we were here in the 1980s. And we used to cycle everywhere, and we lived at the Friendship Hotel, and had all of these nice services, and all the foreigners were there. It was extremely interesting. Remember the bird market and cycling. All the streams of people

cycling. And weekly trips from the [foreign language 00:04:43], the friendship hotel, to the [foreign language 00:04:47] friendship store all the way across city. And it would take us all day, and we get on these buses and go and shop and then come back. And I'm sorry, I'm digressing here a little bit, but it was extremely interesting, but it was also a kind of a time and a place that you knew you wouldn't be there forever. You wouldn't be staying in China forever. It was a... It was an experience, right?

Bill: It was a... Most people came for a year. I came for three years, almost stayed longer. It was in transition. And, maybe it wasn't really as nice as you would want, right? We didn't have cars, and people didn't have apartments, and there were restrictions on where you could live. So now all of that has changed, right? We have Starbucks, McDonald's. We have great places to go and to eat. I have a car. I drive myself. I live in a nice apartment in a Chinese neighborhood, a Chinese compound. And so, things are much more convenient and I guess that's why I'm here now for the long-term. Whereas, I wouldn't have probably stayed this if it was still the 1990s, right?

Scott Simmie: Back when we were first there, there were some people who really enjoyed the experience of being in China but knew that they weren't going to return or be there for the longterm. And there were other people who seem to know immediately that this place resonated with them and sort of dove in and began studying the language. And you were one of those people who decided at that time, I'm going to learn Chinese. And, I recall looking at you and thinking, man, I wish I had that sort of discipline. I just, I really wanted to learn Chinese. I learned enough to get by, but you really pursued it. What do you think it was about the country that made you know, and that made you want to do that?

Bill: I actually don't like the term ex-pat because it refers to someone who has come for a year or two, and has done business and ends up assimilating some parts of China and thinking that they know everything there is to know about China when they don't. And so the language, right from the very beginning, I knew that if I wanted to really understand what China and Chinese people was like, I'd have to learn some of the language. And I'll tell you, it sure makes my experience here a lot different from most people. And I don't mean to say that my Chinese is perfect. I still have a long way to go, but I could communicate with people in a very friendly and open manner and learn from them. Their kind of, their thinking about life and about things, right? Just my interaction, my daily life, is so much better when, because I can speak Chinese. It really it's really made a huge difference.

Scott Simmie: Tell us what a typical day is like.

Bill: Well, they all seem to be running into each other these days, but I play and teach golf. If you can believe it in China here, this is a big thing it's... Golf is still kind of a niche sport and people don't understand it very well. They think, "Oh, it's a luxury sport. It's too expensive." And in fact it is expensive in China, more so than in Canada, but it's expanding. It really has expanded. And since the virus, the Corona virus, since things have been sort of opening up golf was one of the first things that did open up. We could play on a course and our driving range has opened up. So to your question, what do I do? I, for example, today, I got up and my wife and I went to the range where it was extremely hot and we practiced some golf for a long time. I'm also a teacher there, so I had a couple of meetings with people, golf instructor. And they're a cafe, and we're trying to figure out an English name, The Players Club, I think it's going to be.

Bill: And so, I kind of hang around there. Everybody's really friendly. And then we had some... That range is right near a mall and outlet and we went to Starbucks. I went to Starbucks and got a sandwich and brought it back to the range. And we sat there and the big open space, and it was real, real nice, hit few more balls, came home, did some reading and some work. The little shopping beforehand. And then I had a lesson at four o'clock back to the range with young Ray, who's 10 years old and making great progress as a golfer. And then just before rushing home, took advantage to drop into the gym that has

just opened, reopened, I'm glad that his because I've kind of ballooned up over the last couple of months. And then came home and had a really nice home cooked Chinese meal.

Scott Simmie: I'd like to go back to January of this year. January, February. Corona virus really started getting on the public radar with the lockdown of Wu Han in January. What was it like living in Beijing at that time? And knowing that this thing was unfolding inside your country and might potentially come to your city.

Bill: It was extremely worrisome, and was right around Chinese new year. And I don't know if people in the West understand that Chinese new year is like Thanksgiving and Christmas all wrapped into one. And we heard about the Wu Han lockdown just as my wife was going to go home to see and to visit for a couple of days over Chinese new year. And, it was really quite shocking and she canceled her ticket. We've debated back and forth, whether it was that serious and we should do that and we decided, in fact, my wife's a whole family that doesn't live in Xi'an, decided not to go back and that was the safest thing. So, that was really the starting gun of the whole thing that has happened since then.

Scott Simmie: And, when the lockdown was on in Beijing, because I understand that in most major Chinese cities, as in the rest of the world, there was a period where your movements were restricted. What was that like? How did you get groceries? How far did you have to go?

Bill: Well, Scotty, I mean, Beijing wasn't locked down, right? Wu Han was locked down where people were told they couldn't leave their homes. They couldn't leave the city. We were never really, we were never locked down but we had to have, wear a mask. Gosh, it was so shocking. Just as all of this was unfolding, going to our local grocery store, called Jenny's, and people were lined up, like overnight, this happened, people were lined up at the cash register buying thousands of yuan, renminbi, hundreds and hundreds of dollars worth of groceries. It just, it was just so amazing that people were inline with two shopping carts full of food, right? That there's this panic immediately set in. And can you guess what we did? We bought a whole bunch of stuff to store, right? And, you know, rice beans, pasta, and all, all of that stuff.

Bill: We did it too. And there were images that, of the counters going bare, but it wasn't, it was not for long. My apartment is right directly above a supermarket that is a Beijing wide chain called [foreign language 00:12:57]. And there was a rush, but within a day or two, there were stacks and stacks of vegetables within the store. Where you would normally have seen them in the, they would have been put in the back store room. These were right in the store as a kind of a show that they're not, that nothing is going to be running low or we're going to be out of food. So, that was quite the initial onset of the whole thing. There was, I hate to use the word panic. It wasn't, we weren't really panicked, but there was some panic buying for sure.

Bill: And then there was the issue of face mask, trying to get face mask, and Fom Fung bought some, my wife bought some right at the very beginning and got some. So, that was the beginning of it. And really it's lasted until, really the very acute measures, the very serious measures that we all, everybody took seriously without complaint, have lasted right up until the last couple of weeks. Now we have an app on our phone that you have to show and scan. And I think it does a couple of things, we don't know exactly. First of all it checks you in, or your phone into the location that you arrive at. And secondly, it, I think it pings all of the past places your phone has been to make sure that you haven't been somewhere where there has been an outbreak or outside the city, and you should be in quarantine or something like that.

Scott Simmie: One of the things I recall seeing on Chinese social media that I have not really seen happening in North America is sort of the widespread use of thermal scanning. Where someone with a handheld scanner would check your temperature. Was that fairly common in Beijing? Or is it still going on?

Bill: It happens all the time, everywhere you went. Every time I came in and out of the community, there was someone with the little guard, security guard would be there with a thermal scanner, with a little thermometer and flash your wrist. At first, it was your forehead, but then I guess they moved it to the wrist. And it could happen every public place you went to you would have your temperature taken. It was quite amazing and it was quite well organized. Not sure if it was real. Often times we come in the gate and they would shoot the light at your arm and then not look at the temperature. And in the wintertime, I would demand, not demand, I would ask the guard, "What's my temperature?"

Bill: One time it was 43 degrees. And another time it red, 23 degrees. We kind of just laughed. I mean, that was... It was the principle of the thing, right? I mean, if you're sick and you're going to get detected, you have to obey the common sense rules of putting yourself in quarantine, right? And that's what's really been amazing for me to see here, is that there's a new normal that everybody adheres to. There's no question about whether you should wear a mask? Whether you should do the right thing? Whether you should wash your hands? Whether you should social distance? Although that's still an issue, right? It always has been in China. It's a crowded place, but there's just this sense that it's the duty of the individual to like conform to what is required to benefit the larger society.

Bill: And Scotty, I just tell you this story a little bit about an outbreak that happened in June at a market. I don't know if you've heard about this at the [foreign language 00:16:59], where there was a wholesale market, a huge wholesale market, and some people were getting sick there. And that whole area, way to the South of where I live, the Southwest of Beijing where I live about 60 kilometers away, but still really in Beijing proper, right? That's how big the city is. The whole... All the communities around there, and when I say all, I'm not sure exactly if every single one of them, but many of them were locked down and people were told they couldn't leave their communities for two weeks. And food was brought in and left for them and groceries the same, but people just knew that they couldn't leave. And it even happened to my wife's doctor, she canceled an appointment because she was in quarantine and wasn't sick.

Bill: It ends up that that outbreak, that at one time was spotting over a hundred people a day is gone. It's over with. And within weeks it's over it, didn't spread. People weren't going to bars. They weren't going out. They weren't having friends over for dinner. It's just sort of like the most basic common sense you can imagine. And the people made these sacrifices. I mean, surely they must have been upset and pissed off and really difficult, but they did it. And nobody, I don't know about nobody, but people just knew they had to do what they had to do. Right?

Scott Simmie: And when you watch that and when you see how it's been handled inside China. You talk about an outbreak that had the potential to become another wave. And it's all tamped down in a short period of time. What do you think when you look at other parts of the world and how they are responding. Is there any example that comes to your mind when you cast your eyes abroad?

Bill: Yeah. People in China, again, cannot fathom what is going on in the US. And I'm sure it's not only people in China who can't fathom this, but there's some language and understanding and cultural differences that have always existed between North America and West and China, but this has just exasperated the whole thing. That whole sense. Trying to understand what is going on over there. I mean, when you think about after Wuhan, and after China, Italy was struck very seriously and they have been able to recover. Whereas, it's not happening in the U S yeah. Yeah. It's really a very concerning time in the world. And I think if I look back on the WeChats that you and I had in January and February, we see that you were more forward-thinking than I was. You were concerned and I was just trying to play it out. I didn't quite believe that it was going to get to this extent, but...

Scott Simmie: We've heard the US president refer to the virus as the Chinese virus. Is that something that comes up in discussion when you're speaking with Chinese friends? And what do they say when they hear the US president say this?

Bill: Right? That is the worst thing that has happened to China in a long, long time. I mean, it is so insulting and so negative and such a mean spirited thing to say. It's just awful. And Chinese people get their news from their own source, their own unique source of news. And it is been played, this Trump's response has been played over and over again. And it's seen here as, by most people, as a mirror election ploy, right? That he is trying to rally his base, "contain China." This is the phrase that we always hear, that US is trying to contain China, right? Decoupling between the US and the Chinese economies. I mean, it's just, there's something in Chinese people would, most people would agree that there's something just crazy. There's some craziness that's happening here. This kind of rhetoric in this overt racism is just so hurtful.

Bill: It's just awful. When I think about, just to go back to where we were talking about reminiscing, about our time in China, in the 1980s and nineties, and the US was seen as the the place where everybody wanted to be and wanted to go. And the television shows that you saw how Americans lived were so beautiful, and so upscale, and so beyond the wildest dreams that most people could have. A washing machine? A refrigerator? A dishwasher? And people just looked up to the US and thought that that was, that was where they wanted to be. And now, in the last number of years, we talked about the China dream, building up a middle-class and beyond middle-class here in China. And then we get smacked in the head by this... by Trump and his terrible phrasy of words and actions. It's really sad.

Scott Simmie: The vast majority of people in North America will never, ever, ever understand China the way that you do. If you want it to tell one of those people, who'd never been to China and who never will get there, something about the Chinese people, what would you tell them?

Bill: I will Tell them, I would tell them without hesitation that the average Chinese people are far freer than them North Americans or Westerners think. The level of life and Liberty, and the ability to pursue happiness here, the ability to pursue a career and a life, and to build the life, and a family is as high as anywhere North America or Europe.

Speaker 4: All right, Bill, you haven't heard this sound before. I have not told you this is coming, but this sound, indicates that we're at the rapid fire section. Where I'm going to ask you just a few very short questions, and you're going to give me a few short answers. One, what is your favorite type of Chinese food?

Bill: My wife is from Xi'an, so I like [foreign language 00:23:57] . That's a [foreign language 00:00:24:00]. That's all you get.

Scott Simmie: [foreign language 00:24:05].

Bill: It's a hot dish with lamb cooked in it and a bun, an unleavened bun, that's ripped into a million pieces and put in the soup and it is so good. That's what I like.

Scott Simmie: What's your favorite type of North American food

Bill: Salmon. Salmon. I'll do with the salmon.

Scott Simmie: What's your favorite time of the year in China?

Bill: Not this time of year. That's for sure. It is 38 degrees and 98% humidity. So I would say it's a toss up between spring and fall. I think spring, spring comes way earlier here than in Canada. So, it's really nice to be able to go play golf and in late February.

Scott Simmie: Okay. What's your favorite place in China, outside of Beijing?

Bill: Oh, you know I haven't really done very much traveling, but I really liked my wife's hometown Xi'an. It's where the terracotta soldiers are. It's really an amazing city. And another example of how China has developed like crazy. It used to be, when I lived there in the eighties after I left Beijing. I lived in Xi'an for

one year and I used to call it a small provincial town of 6 million people. And now it's an amazing provincial capital that is doing incredibly well and is built up like crazy.

Scott Simmie: And finally, Bill, what do you look forward to doing most when the pandemic is over that you can't do right now?

Bill: That is easy. I want to return to Saskatchewan to see my 18 month old granddaughter, who I have never met.

Scott Simmie: Wow. Well, I look forward to you being able to do that hopefully sooner, rather than later. Bill Siggins, thank you so much. It's been super great to catch up and also to hear the perspective of someone who was living in China through this very remarkable year and period. Thanks so much, Bill.

Bill: It's great talking to you. Scotty. Let's stay in touch.

Scott Simmie: Take care.

Scott Simmie: It really was great to catch up with Bill again. I'm going to try and dust off my Mandarin, which I haven't used since the Olympics in 2008 and say, [foreign language 00:26:26], which means, and maybe I got one of the tones wrong, but it means he is indeed my old friend.

Scott Simmie: [Music]

Scott Simmie: Now, you hear that music, that's from Cui Jian, one of China's biggest rock stars. I had the great fortune of playing drums for him for a year in Beijing, a very long time ago. And I also helped report on the student movement, back in 1989. That was the biggest story I've ever witnessed in my life until 2020 came along.

Scott Simmie: [Music]

Scott Simmie: I'm Scott Simmie, and you've been listening to inside stories.

Legal Disclaimer: The views expressed here are those of the participants and not those of bank of Montreal, it's affiliates or subsidiaries.