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SUPERCHIEF INTERVIEWS

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DRINKING AND DRIVING IN URUMQI: AN INTERVIEW WITH ANDREW DEMETRE

Andrew Demetre's first book, *Drinking and Driving in Urumqi*, clocks in at a sparse 88 pages. This is surprising considering the author's inexhaustible wealth of hard-line information regarding the subject and his equally sustainable enthusiasm for sharing it. Strangely enough, the book is nothing like Andrew, or at least the New York City incarnation of the author (manic, frantically intelligent.) Instead, the book reads with a minimal Hemmingway meets Buddha-Zen-like authority. Where Demetre sees himself as a fast-talking Bourdain or Gonzo apprentice, he comes off as something much more refreshing, an original. Ultimately a poetic exercise in American voyeurism, the book follows Andrew during one full night as he is driven around the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China by two burly, hard drinking Uyghur political heavies and the mysterious and often elusive love interest that drew Andrew to China's remote Northwest in the first place. *Drinking and Driving in Urumqi* is a fantastic introduction to an exciting new voice, sure to leave you with a new found appreciation for first world freedoms and a staunch thirst for exotic foreign spirits.

Mr. Demetre spoke with Kurt McVey at The Superchief Gallery at Culturefix on the L.E.S. before the first of many readings throughout the East and West Coast of the old U.S. of A.

Kurt: Did you have a publisher lined up before you took this trip?

Andrew: No, I didn't. The book was kind of forced out of me. I'm sort of guilty of being an experience junkie and a risk taker. I also wanted to confront certain things about my personality. Writing doesn't come easily to me necessarily. I felt that I had to write this book to sort of confront my forgotten "writer self" and I found a lot of parallels going to a very restricted culture in West China where the book takes place.

Kurt: You said earlier that you don't keep a journal and that you're not really a note taker.

Andrew: I pride myself on my superb Grecian memory. (*Laughs*)

Kurt: At the end of a long day in Urumqi, especially if you're drinking strange and highly potent homemade liquors, how do you retain the intricacies of the experience? Are the things you actually remember the only things worth remembering-a sort of memory content filter?

Andrew: My handwriting is so God awful, honestly, and I could show you, I wouldn't be able to read it anyway, neither could you. I also have an obsessive mind that's constantly juggling the past, present, and future. So when I have the opportunity to lie down and reflect upon my experiences, I find myself relishing them, or maybe kind of scaring myself, and kind of reliving it from a story standpoint, down to the minute details.

Kurt: So the entire book was written after the journey was completed.

Andrew: Yes. Although, I did do a series of podcasts which I've now erased from the internet for a number of reasons, as well as a few live speeches about the subject which I was able to reference. I was able to speak these ideas out before writing them down, which helped. Really, the book was more of an exercise in editing. The craft of writing, for me, is more a physical trial than a mental one. It's not about intelligence or imagination. The question for me was; how do you turn this overwhelming experience into a palatable, somewhat coherent narrative?

Kurt: Well, how did you?

Andrew: (*laughs*) Well first, you have to know what good writing looks, sounds, and feels like, so when your own stuff gets close, you can recognize it. It took me three or four drafts to get this book right.

Kurt: Do you have any weird routines or activities to get into the mood for writing?

Andrew: I do practice this thing that I call Alpha Wave Meditation, sometimes I can experience that while running as well. It's more than a runner's high. Your body turns into this machine and your mind can drift back to, in this case Urumqi, both

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psychologically as well as spiritually. I also sometimes get these weird silent migraines when I travel. It's a migraine without pain. You go into this white tunnel and you get very nauseous. I experienced this first in China. The second time was in Thailand in the middle of a busy intersection. It was spiritual at times. Eventually I came to embrace it.

Kurt: Let's talk about the tone of the book. Did you decide on a general mood or style before putting words on the page?

Andrew: I didn't want to commit to this hard context, fact driven, travel log thing. It's more in the memoir or creative non-fiction category, which does give you some leeway. I didn't go to China as a journalist. Not all of the informal details are accurate, but the general truth and tone of the overall experience is authentic.

Kurt: Tells us about your hopes and ambitions as far as the book having a cultural or political impact.

Andrew: Primarily, I just wanted to share my experiences with somebody in a way that is, I don't know if I would use the word entertaining as much as I would use stimulating, while also imparting some facts about a little known place and also to create some curiosity about the Uyghur people.

Kurt: There is a great moment in the book where one of your guides asks you a series of questions regarding freedoms in America. He's totally genuine, but the questions become increasingly absurd from our perspective. I found myself laughing out loud. I think one of the questions was, "Can you play the guitar in the street and sing songs about birds?"

Andrew: *(Laughs)* He was genuine, it almost made me cry. Expression is important, a human urge. For governments to stifle that, or warp it into propaganda of any kind is wrong. And yes, in America you can still sing songs about birds.

Kurt: Are you proud to identify as an American?

Andrew: I sort of go along with other writers who have influenced me in that I consider myself a world citizen who happens to have the luxury of an American passport-a document I've found to be based on a lot of worldwide control of other countries-but I wouldn't have these freedoms without that. I'm not proud of the way it's done. There's a section in my book where I get kind of weepy about the passport and what that access really means. As an American overseas, you're both a target and a conduit. In China people were continually telling me their secrets in back rooms: *Can you get this message to Obama? We're doing this. We're doing that. We're bringing tanks into Tibet.* It was insane and humbling.

Kurt: If someone were to read this book and then decide to follow in your footsteps, what advice would you give them?

Andrew: I don't want to trump up the book like I was in a warzone, but Urumqi is still oppressed by the Communist China ruling party and is still reeling from some serious riots, and being that I was hosted by a very underground minority culture, and in deep with some very prominent figures in that world, you have to be careful, more tactful actually. You never know what could happen. As far as getting a ticket, moving through Beijing, then making your way to Urumqi, I would highly advise doing that.

Kurt: If a film were made of this book, what actor would play you?

Andrew: That's an interesting question. I mean, one wants to flatter themselves with their choice, am I correct?

Kurt: No judgments here.

Andrew: I know exactly who would do it but you have to help me with his name. He's kind of the dark Tom Cruise. He was in *Before the Dawn* by Werner Herzog. He was also in *The Mechanic*...

Kurt: Christian Bale.

Andrew: Right Christian Bale. Not that I'm as handsome as him, but he's just really intense. I relate to his intensity. I relate to the fact that he can suffer, you know? When you're traveling around the world by yourself, you're willfully suffering.

Andrew *Demetre will be speaking on the interpenetrations of Soviet influence on the Xinjiang province and more at KGB bar in the east Village Dec. 17th.*

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If there was a 25th hour in the day, I'd probably use it to get more wasted.

