

SPOTLIGHT CHINA

FROM MAO TO MISSION HILLS

*China is building more new courses than any other country on the planet. But golf's transition from a bourgeois, elitist sport to a game of the people in this Brave New World Communist Party World is something of a Chinese puzzle, as **Peter Swain** discovered*

First-time visitors to the Sheshan Club in Shanghai, where, this October, Ian Poulter defends his WGC HSBC title, are in for a surprise. For a start, there are more Ferraris, Lambos and Range Rovers in the car park than you can shake a chopstick at. And in a bid for instant antiquity, the ivy-clad clubhouse – which I had expected to reflect the oriental splendour of the Forbidden City – is

built 'in the classic Tuscan style', with an interior best described as tartan Ralph Lauren meets leather-clad post-Ming bling.

Its lavish facilities are on a par with Wentworth's. They include an indoor pool, palatial locker rooms, vast walk-in humidor (in which members have their own private cigar lockers), and a Chairman's cellar with vintage single malts dating back to Old Tom Morris.

In a country where the Communist Party still holds sway, and the government owns all land, the private Sheshan Club costs upwards of £200,000 to join, and has, at its heart, 20-odd Versailles-sized mansions costing £18m



(Clockwise from left): Mission Hills Shenzhen, is at the forefront of golf's development in China, with 12 courses in operation and plans to add a further 20+ on Hainan Island; the ivy-clad clubhouse at Sheshan, home to the WGC HSBC Championship; typically vibrant street scenes, Guangzhou

European Tour events this year, to England's one, is a telling comment on how the sponsors see the future of the game.

And you can see why. The club's two courses anchor a brand-new 100sq km town, the first of eight such schemes by this one developer alone. They think big in China. The clubhouse at Lake Malaren is a three-story mahogany-clad marvel in which the new Chinese Masters of the Universe discuss who's taking over which car, energy or mining company next. You see, golf in China is all about *Quanxi*: the art of building relationships.

The country's rapidly growing upper-middle class needs a stage on which to flaunt its newfound wealth and status. The golf club is the perfect venue for doing deals, as well as indulging in the national passion: gambling. According to Hal Phillips of Mandarin Media, an expert in the Asian Pacific golf market, "The Chinese will bet on anything from who wins the match, to a putt – the caddies especially. It's something of a cultural fetish."

Caddies in the Far East are usually compulsory, and invariably female. In China there's a hierarchy. The ones on the two Nicklaus-

plus. As for the course itself, the set-up, condition and design bears comparison with Valderrama, while for exclusivity and service, think Augusta.

On the other side of this 21st-century Gotham, home to a staggering 24 million people, is the Lake Malaren Club, which hosts the BMW Masters. The fact that Shanghai has two



designed Lake Malaren courses are officially called, in descending order of excellence: 'Crown Angels', 'Sunshine Angels' and 'Popular Angels'. They're all charmingly dressed in John Daly-style black-and-white-checked trousers, topped off by Bo Peep's pink headgear. Madam Mao must be spinning in her mausoleum.

Etiquette on the course is intriguing. Whatever the standard, tee-shots are invariably hit from the tips. It's all a matter of 'face'. If you're rich and successful enough to be playing in the first place, and enjoying the company of equally macho alpha males, not to mention a clutch of smiling caddies, then only the back tees will do – even if you play, as many Chinese heavy-hitters do, off 36 or more.

I have never seen such an intriguing collection of homemade swings. But actually, it's hardly surprising. With the game viewed as the quintessential bourgeois pastime in Maoist times, the very first course in the country, Palmer's Chung San Hot Spring GC, only opened in 1984. By 2004, there were still only 170 clubs.

So most players have learnt the game in middle age, don't have the time or patience to practice, and refuse to admit any weakness by taking lessons. But they do have money, so the game's recent expansion has been exponential.

According to figures published at the 2012 Asia Golf Show, there are now more than 600 courses in China, a figure expected to double by 2020. Brian Curley of Schmidt-Curley is



(Top): This is a notice board displaying the charms of the 'Sunshine Angels' at Lake Malaren; (main image): Just stunning. How else do you describe the setting of the Stone Forest Country Club; (Left): Run-of-the-mill £18 million (and up) mansions decorate the course at Sheshan



CHINA BY NUMBERS

£14	THE COST OF A SLEEVE OF PRO V1's
£88	THE COST OF WEEKDAY GREEN FEES AT DRAGON LAKE, WEEKENDS £158, INCLUDING CART AND CADDIE
133	NEW COURSES HAVE OPENED IN THE PAST 3 YEARS
£198	THE COST OF A ROOM AT THE FOUR SEASONS GUANGZHOU – THE MOST SPECTACULAR PERCH IN TOWN
600	COURSES IN CHINA TODAY COMPARED WITH 170 TEN YEARS AGO
1,000	COURSES PROJECTED TO BE READY FOR PLAY BY 2020
£5,000	THE AVERAGE ANNUAL WAGE
10,000	STAFF AT MISSION HILLS SHENZHEN, WITH 12 COURSES AND 3,000 CADDIES
£30,000	THE AVERAGE ANNUAL GOLF CLUB SUB IN CHINA
3 MILLION	GOLFERS ACCORDING TO CHINA GOLF ASSOCIATION, INDEPENDENT OBSERVERS RECKON NEARER 500,000
1.3 BILLION	POPULATION OF CHINA
2.7 MILLION	DOLLAR MILLIONAIRES IN CHINA TODAY. FAVOURITE SPORT? GOLF

one designer on a roll.

"We've completed about 40 courses in China, including 10 at Mission Hills Shenzhen, and 10 on Hainan Island. And we're comfortably busy now with another eight under construction." Most of the big boys in golf architecture have offices in China. The Nicklaus.com/design website even has a choice of two languages, English and Mandarin.

What does Curley think about the quality of new projects? "China is producing better courses every year, and with new styles emerging, the country is set to become the main showcase of innovative design trends." Developers with deep pockets, and cheap labour – the average annual salary is 1/6th the cost of an average annual golf sub – make almost anything possible.

The irony is that in 2004, a moratorium was placed on the building of new courses. So most now pass under the radar as 'sports parks', 'ecological playgrounds' or 'country clubs'. Nobody knows the exact figure, but experts guesstimate the number of clubs with all their permits in order at the highest level to be fewer than one in 10.

Local officials wave permissions through in exchange for suitable remuneration. In the case of Lake Malaren, the local authority own

20% of the set-up, and all is above board. Elsewhere, financial relationships are rather murkier.

According to Hal Phillips, "talking to designers and golf people in China is like walking on eggshells – no one knows when things will officially loosen up and no one wants to upset the authorities by talking too much."

The exception is Hainan Island in the south-east, which has been zoned for tourist development. Forty courses have been built there in the past 10 years, with another 60 due for completion by 2025. Mission Hills is aiming for 22 courses to add to the 12 it already has back in Shenzhen.

My first glimpse of Chinese golf was actually in Guangzhou, or Canton as it used to be known, just up the Pearl River from Hong Kong. The brand-new King course at the hilly Dragon Lake resort, designed by IMG's Steve Shepherdson, is visually stunning – a mountainous Willow Pattern on steroids.

(Below): Dragon Lake Resort features two dramatic courses, this being a glimpse of Dragon Valley; (above): 'Hairy Crab' is one of the highlights on an extensive menu at Four Seasons Guangzhou



The vertiginous cart path winding up through the extravagantly sculpted scenery, 220m from lakeside bottom to mountain top, would challenge Bradley Wiggins. There are holes featuring spectacular elevated tee shots over rocky chasms that are presumably sponsored by golf ball manufacturers, and doglegs around ancient banyan trees. Together with fast contoured greens, it makes for a brilliant round.

In Guangzhou, I was staying at the equally dramatic new Four Seasons – another virile miracle of modern China. The hotel starts at the 70th floor of a 103-storey tower. From my room on the 86th floor, I watched helicopters way below me flying over the city.

Breathtaking. The rooms are palatial, and



(Top): Featuring this 25-metre outcrop of rock, the 17th hole at Lotus Hill is the 'signature' on what is a fabulous Bernhard Langer design in Guangdong Province, on the Pearl River Delta; (left): Take the elevator. You'll find the Four Seasons' reception on the 70th floor...



food exemplary, but best of all, the concierge people are up to speed on all the local courses, and wonderfully helpful in organizing both play and transport.

Golf in China is still mostly for the Chinese – it'll be a few years before Thai-style travel packages from the likes of golfasian.com appear in any number. But the centre of golfing gravity is gradually moving East, and it's refreshing to see that traditional Western values enshrined in institutions like the R&A are in the vanguard of ushering Maoist collectivism into the modern world. 