

On My Mind
5/12/00

I've just returned from 4 ½ days in Beijing, as well as 5 ½ days in Hong Kong. (The purpose of the trip was to meet the parents, who reside in Hong Kong, of the gal my son is marrying, and to visit my sister and her husband in Beijing, where he had been invited to lecture at Beijing University for two months.) I had a great time, and I'm very glad I went to both places, because it helps in putting things in perspective, in making comparison.

Admittedly, it was a short visit, and Beijing is only a very small part of China, but to the extent that Beijing and its surroundings are at all typical of the rest of China, I found that part of my visit rather sad, depressing, and disturbing.

We were there during the week China had declared its first ever week-long holiday to coincide with its Labor Day (May 1st) celebration, something that had apparently been decided on rather short notice - one of the buildings in Tiananmen Square sported lots of red flags with nothing on them - there hadn't been time, I was told, to get them printed with any kind of commemorative slogan. None of us had realized that hotel rooms would be at a premium that week, because of the holiday.

The day we went to see the Summer Palace, which sits in the middle of the city fronted by a huge lake, there were throngs of in-country tourists. Except for one guide book with picture captions in English, French and German, which an enterprising hawker pushed under our noses, little else was in any western language - building labels, vendor goods, directional signs. We used the guide book to find our way. None of the buildings of the Palace were open - one could only look through the windows - smeared with everyone else's finger prints and faces pressed to the glass. The furnishings inside looked worn and dusty, as did most of the grounds - though that may have been due to its being the dry season.

I'd long admired Chinese art, scroll paintings, temple dragons, delicate porcelains, jade carvings, their sense of line, color, design, perspective, and had been looking forward to seeing and enjoying not mere reproductions, but the real thing, on my visit. I still have a children's book about China and illustrated by a Chinese artist that I've held onto because I thought the artwork so thoroughly charming.

However, much of the Summer Palace had been ravaged in the 1860's, and again in 1900. According to the guide books, the gardens and hills have since been reconstructed, but except for a couple of large sculpted temple dogs outside one of the buildings, I didn't get any sense of either China's early history or its renowned art work here. That was disappointing. In addition, much of the exterior decoration looked primitive when compared to the elaborate mosaics, for example, of the ancient city of Jerusalem. Overall, the pictures in the guide book were far more impressive than what was visible in person.

The huge lake on which the palace sits was also depressing. Its water was brown and dirty, with typical tourist debris floating on its surface along with the small row boats, paddle boats, and

slightly larger dragon-decorated ferries carrying people from one side to another.

Late in the afternoon we came across four groups of Caucasians. Until then, we'd seen only a few, and were ourselves the subject of stares from everyone else in the park. My sister thought it was the beards sported by my brother-in-law and my son - in addition to our white skins - that drew so much attention. (We saw very few Orientals with any form of facial hair.) One brave young girl asked my son - in sign language - to pose with her for a picture. Little girls were very fancifully dressed - bows in their hair, ruffles on their dresses, bows on their shoes. That seemed a little strange in a country that supposedly values boy children more than girl children. On the other hand, with only one child per family, perhaps it's natural to dote on the child one has. Yet the boys were not nearly as dressed up. Nor were the parents.

The city of Beijing has wide four-lane divided streets lined with trees, with an additional lane in each direction set aside for bicycles, motor cycles and the rare pedis-cab. Its profile, especially compared to Hong Kong, is low-rise, with only scattered high-rise buildings. Except on my last day, when it rained, which created a massive traffic jam - due, apparently, to all the cyclists taking cabs instead - the streets easily accommodated all the traffic.

We did not encounter the teeming hordes of people on the streets that we did in Hong Kong, where, no matter what the time of day, there was hardly room to open an umbrella, to walk side by side.

But the air was even more polluted than I remember Bangkok being - or even Manila, thanks to the diesel-burning busses and trucks, the ring of mountains around the city that trapped the polluted air. There was no sun, no sky, only brownish-gray above. Grittiness I could feel on my face. Air so dry my lips chapped. No grass, only dirt along the sidewalks where the trees grew.

Also depressing and disturbing were the stories told by the very articulate post-doctoral Chinese who went with us on a day's trip to Simitai - a part of the Great Wall that has not yet been reconstructed and turned into a vendor-dominated tourist site. She and her parents had been sent to the country during the Cultural Revolution, and she told us she'd learned to carry more than her weight balanced on poles across her shoulders. She said the Cultural Revolution did not so much change the attitudes of the "intellectuals" sent to the country as it had the farmers with whom they came in contact. She agreed that in its own way, it was similar to a "Peace Corps" program - with the farmers learning about modernity from those sent down from the city.

But when the machinery introduced during that time broke down, there was no one to repair it, and eventually, the farmers were reduced to doing things as they had before, but now feeling frustrated after having been exposed to different ways of looking at things, of doing things.

During the Cultural Revolution, she said, Mao Tse Tsung had ordered all the birds killed, because the birds were eating the seeds the farmers planted. No one seemed to understand the role of birds in maintaining the balance of nature. When the countryside then became plagued with flies, among other things, Mao was forced to offer a bounty on flies captured by the people

out in the country. Even now, she said, the understanding of ecology is limited. Trees are planted in an attempt to halt erosion, but no effort is made to plant a variety. Thus, when disease hits the trees, all die, and planting must be done all over again.

There is talk of the need to find a more hardy grass for the parks in the city, for the strips of dry dirt surrounding the trees along sidewalks in the city. As though no one had thought it through, figured it out, when the first round of grass was planted.

Two other Chinese I met also spoke of the effect of the Cultural Revolution on themselves and their families. I got the impression that no one escaped, that it had affected the entire nation.

China is so poor it uses very few coins. Most of its money is paper - with the different denominations distinguished by different sizes. A ten yuan note is larger than one yaun, and a smaller 5 jiao is larger than an even smaller 2 jiao. It's money was not as worn and dirty, though, as the paper money I encountered in Egypt last year.

I kept having to pinch myself to remind myself I was really in China - that big, bad, hostile country the U.S. keeps trying to brow-beat and