

REMINISCENCES ON THE EVE OF THE MID-AUTUMN FESTIVAL

Mooncakes for morning tea in The Australian National University Library is a simple ritual celebrated every year by the staff of the Asian Studies Division in honour of the mid-Autumn Festival. For me, however, this year the occasion was touched with poignancy for it brought a flood of recollections of life in the National Library of China rushing to the forefront of my mind.

On the eve of the mid-Autumn Festival last year, I was presented with a box of assorted mooncakes on behalf of the Library administration. Beijing was already beginning to take on a festive appearance in preparation for the National Day celebrations which followed only a few days later. The red, silk lanterns with golden tassels which festooned the major buildings punctuated the normally drab, dusty city of muted yellows and greys with splashes of brilliant colour. With only a few precious days remaining before I was due to leave Beijing for visits to libraries in Southern China, the festival for me was a time to gaze at the full Autumn moon and reflect on my life in Beijing during the previous 5 months.

For the first 3 months of my stay in Beijing, I lived at Peking University (Bei Da) in a cosy little room on the fifth and top floor of Shao Yuan's number 5 building. The Shao Yuan complex of 5 buildings accommodates Peking University's overseas students and other foreign visitors to the University. I had several creature comforts which I had not expected such as a telephone and a small colour TV, and room 502 very quickly became a haven.

The day began at around 6 in the morning when I usually woke to the slow, rhythmic sound of the night-porter sweeping the courtyard below before he went off duty. It was the summer term at Bei Da and, as the dust-laden winds of the spring gave way to the oppressive, enervating heat of the summer, examination fever mounted. Often lying awake in the morning waiting until 6.30am when the hot water was turned on before having my bath, I could hear one of the students reciting by heart on the balcony of the overseas students' building opposite. When I left for work at 7.20am, hundreds of bicycles were already parked outside the library and the campus was usually dotted with solitary students standing under the shade of a tree reciting passages from their text-books. As the day wore on, the lawns in front of the University Library, still dominated by a monolithic statue of Mao, took on the appearance of a picnic ground with groups of students scattered around them. At dusk, the students could again be seen learning by heart from their text-books but under the light of the street lamps. Student dormitories are crowded (usually 6-8 to a dormitory in double bunks) and poorly lit so adequate conditions for study are probably difficult to achieve.

Bei Da has a lovely campus with many beautiful, old buildings with traditional Chinese-style roofs and small-paned windows. Sadly, however, most of them are badly in need of restoration. Moreover, the quality of the restoration work on the few that have already been restored is poor and seems generally to have been limited to gaudy paint-work. Then there are the drab, modern buildings of 4 or 5 storeys like the one I lived in and the University Library which have absolutely nothing to recommend them

except that they are functional. The main thoroughfare through the campus looks more like a country lane with trees along both sides forming a canopy of green foliage which keeps it cool for the donkey carts and thousands of cyclists that ply its length every day. Stone lions guard the gates to the campus.

It was an interesting term at Bei Da with impromptu posters calling for democracy plastered on walls and other more formal notices complaining about the quality of the food and demanding various improvements such as fresh vegetables to be brought in from the countryside. At the beginning of May, in celebration of the May 4th Movement of 1919 in which students of Bei Da played an important part, there were twilight bonfires around the campus and a stone boat at the edge of the lake was the venue for a student sing-song - both revolutionary and romantic songs. Disco dancing is of enormous appeal and occasionally the mind had to adjust to the incongruity of disco music emanating from one of the dilapidated, old buildings as hundreds of cyclists converged on it.

The lake, called Weiminghu (the unnamed lake) is about a 3 or 4 minute walk from Shao Yuan and was a favourite and very lovely spot for a stroll after dinner in the evenings. Unfortunately, it usually meant I had to sacrifice the hot water for my bath and the laundry because the hot water was turned off at 8.00pm - sometimes earlier. A beautiful pagoda towers over the lake at one end and shimmers in the water. As the light fades, students sit around the lake, often in couples, and talk. The graceful flight of swallows enhances the neglect of the old buildings.

There is a lily pond right next to Shao Yuan which is the home of many frogs. Their chorus lulled me to sleep at night - particularly after the heavy evening rains we had at the height of the summer. The water-lilies were in bloom and of course everywhere the willow trees! The lily pond was drained one Sunday and the children had a great time wading in the mud and catching fish which they subsequently sold!

Fortunately, I enjoy my own company otherwise one could feel very lonely. Foreigners are still relatively isolated from the local community and contact with it is carefully controlled even at Bei Da which is more liberal than most other places. The night-porter, who starts his shift about 7.30pm, kept a daily log of comings and goings. The front door was locked at night, probably at about midnight, and you had to wake up the porter to get back in.

In the short time that I was there, there were many changes both at Shao Yuan and at the library. China's four modernizations were apparent everywhere. New gardens were planted at the library in the front courtyard, around number 7 building, the new one where my office was, and in front of number 6 building which houses the Chinese catalogues and reading rooms and looks out onto Bei Hai park. In the summer, masses of red canna lilies in pots (previously under glass in the greenhouse opposite the large classroom) graced the courtyard and the steps and balconies of the foremost buildings. A large rock garden and lawns were established in front of Shao Yuan too. On the same Sunday that the pond was drained, donkey carts brought loads of instant turf (it certainly fell short of bowling green standard - instant tussocks would probably be a more accurate description - but it was better than dust!) and the next morning, at the crack of dawn, a gang of gardeners - all women - arrived to lay it.

The whole city was like one vast building site with gargantuan cranes and scaffolding silhouetted against the skyline everywhere as drab, modern buildings rose towards the sky. At the library, the canteen was extended and the old part had a face-lift. The old concrete sinks, at which everybody washed their own metal bowl or aluminium lunch box, were removed and replaced by new ones lined with gleaming white tiles.

Almost a year after leaving Beijing, these are some of the memories I have hoarded in my mind. The images are still clear although perhaps tinged with nostalgia. Soon, inevitably, they will begin to fade like old photographs but I shall always treasure them.

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