

REMINISCENCES ON THE EVE OF THE LANTERN FESTIVAL

Preparing for a brief return visit to Beijing in a few days time, I find myself reminiscing once again and wondering whether I will be able to recapture, even if only momentarily some of the experiences I had as an exchange librarian at the National Library of China in 1985. Time past but not time forgotten. There is still such a riot of memories in my mind. I would like to record them all, before they are lost in the haze of the past, but that is not possible. These are just a few that have fought their way to the front of my consciousness.

As the dust-laden winds of the Spring gave way to the oppressive, enervating heat of the Summer, Beijing's 5 million cyclists put away their nylon head-scarves and surgical-type caps and masks and donned wide-brimmed sun-hats made of straw or cotton. The ladies started wearing dresses or skirts with knee-high nylon stockings in preference to slacks. The gentlemen abandoned their Mao-style jackets in favour of shirt sleeves and rolled their trousers up to their knees. Many also had severe hair-cuts. In the afternoons, particularly, umbrellas sprang up like mushrooms on the pavement and cyclists pedalled home shrouded in plastic rain-capes. The whole city longs for the frequent torrential downpours which are a feature of Beijing's summer because of the cool freshness that follows all too fleetingly in their wake. Everybody started carrying hand-fans made of sandalwood, silk or more usually pleated black or white paper decorated with paintings or poems.

The policemen too changed to their summer uniforms bringing a welcome splash of colour to the streets of Beijing. Resplendent in their regalia - white hats and jackets with red and gold trim and green trousers with red braid trim, they conduct the traffic with an iron hand. From their rostrums shaded by red and white striped umbrellas in the centre of major intersections they shout abuse at traffic offenders through megaphones and loudspeakers. Rush hour traffic is not just a sea of sturdy black bicycles with brand names like Flying Pigeon, Phoenix and Forever. It is also articulated buses and trolley-buses, crammed full to overflowing; old-fashioned Chinese limousines with curtained windows, chauffeur-driven and state-owned; modern Japanese taxis, army lorries, trucks, vans, motorbikes, and tricycles. The streets are congested and accidents are not uncommon.

By this time Peking University was practically deserted. Examination fever had abated and most of the students had drifted away to their own homes for the summer vacation. Most of the 'foreign experts' had gone too. Apart from one or two stalwart, long-term residents only a few short-term visitors remained at Shao Yuan. I, too, decided to forsake the relative comfort of Shao Yuan and the twilight rambles by the Unnamed Lake watching the dragonflies skim the surface of the water and left Bei Da for a more central location. I moved to the rather spartan environment of the Overseas Students Building at the Central Conservatorium of Music which is hidden away in the middle of a maze of hutongs (narrow alleys) to the South of the Nationalities Cultural Palace.

Several of the Deputy Directors and other senior staff of the National Library of China voiced reservations about this move and I myself had a few qualms about it. In the event, however, in spite of the austerity of my new life-style, it was a decision I never regretted. In spite of its name, the Overseas Students Building was in fact occupied by Chinese Graduate Students since at the time there were only 3 overseas Chinese students - studying erhu and pipa, all of whom left in August. No longer cocooned in the luxury of a 'foreign enclave' I was able to

live life more or less as it is lived by the Chinese themselves. This opportunity provided me with insights into daily life in urban China which I would not otherwise have had.

Life in the hutongs was fascinating. There was always so much to see. There was the cobbler who occasionally stationed himself at the gates of the conservatorium to ply his trade. Sitting on his fold-up canvas stool, he played Chinese chess while waiting for customers. In the pale light of dawn, old men air birds in dome-shaped bamboo cages which they hang in the trees while they box shadows in the slow, graceful movements of Taijiquan. In the sultry heat of the mid-day sun, people seek out the shade of a tree and sleep on the pavements on straw mats or camp beds. In the late afternoon the hutongs resound with the shrieks and squeals of children playing and in the early evening with the jingle of bicycle bells as workers returning from office or factory swerve to avoid others who have stopped to haggle over vegetables or maybe a water-melon at the street stalls on the way home. Some pause to browse through magazines, comic books or picture stories displayed on makeshift tables - a wooden bench or a metal bedstead in the shade of an impromptu awning strung between 2 trees. Others quench their thirst with lolly-ices called binggunr from the ice-cream hawker with her white-painted wooden box. At dusk, low chairs or bamboo stools are brought out under the street lamps and people sit and gossip over a cup of tea or read the evening paper; the women perhaps do some knitting and old men sit around in their vests puffing on a cigarette or engrossed in games of chess or cards.

One of my most vivid recollections is of breakfast in the library canteen. Arrangements had been made for me to have breakfast as soon as I arrived at the library. Breakfast-time officially ended at 8 a.m. so there were usually only a few stragglers left in the canteen. In the aftermath of the breakfast-time rush I used to sit alone with my bowl of milk, and eggs - fried Chinese-style and sometimes youtiao (a sort of elongated donut) or huajuan (steamed twisted rolls) or paicha or a bowl of noodles - watching the kitchen staff start preparations for lunch: arranging wotou (steamed, maize-meal buns) on massive bamboo steamers as big as cart-wheels; pulling long swathes of dough from the huge kneading machine for the mantou and baozi, or chopping celery, winter-melon or egg-plant. Sometimes one or two of the chefs sat on the stools at the small round tables wrapping jiaozi or occasionally wonton for soup.

Such pleasant memories and there are so many more which I hope to record. Sadly, however, at the moment, time and space forbid it.

Su Shan
Australian National University

