

2 - BEIJING

The seven-hour-long flight from Karachi to Beijing was tedious. Because of the darkness, we could see nothing from the windows. Frank, who was too lively for sleeping, continued to tell me about his travels around the world. However, exhaustion eventually got the better of me and my eyes began to close. We both reclined our seats and endeavoured to sleep. When we were informed that we were flying over the Gobi desert, we looked out of the window but could see nothing. Later we discerned the faint outline of snow-topped mountains somewhere in Mongolia: a very impressive sight.

After this I managed to doze for a while. I woke when the pitch of the engines changed as we began our descent. When I looked out of the window, I could see dawn breaking through a slight mist; below us was Manchuria – a sleeping land bathed in pale morning light. As we gradually descended, we could see mountains, wide rivers that looked as though they were dried up, fields, forests, and towns. We cruised over this ever-changing and fascinating landscape for some considerable time, slowly decreasing in altitude. I felt very excited by the realization that I was now flying over China towards Beijing.

Soon the land became flatter; we could now see large square fields and areas of forest beneath us. Although the landscape was green and lush, the rivers looked rather muddy. Here and there we could see small houses with black tiled roofs. There seemed to be little life about at this hour of the morning. By now the mist had cleared and the sun was shining.

Then slowly we descended, passing over more farms, rivers and villages. We were still out in the countryside when suddenly the runway appeared. Moments later we touched down; the engines roared, the wing flaps popped up, and the momentum of the plane was checked. As we taxied along the runway we saw people, both young and old, walking by the tarmac, pushing large black bicycles; some were even doing their morning exercises. All of them were dressed in loose-fitting dark blue uniforms and wore flat shoes. What fascinated me was the way in which they walked. None of them were in any hurry, and all walked bolt upright, shoulders pulled back, without slouching.

Finally, after a long journey around the airport, the plane came to a halt in front of a small terminal building. At last we had arrived in Beijing Airport

after our long flight; by now it was 5.30 a.m. Soon we were clambering down the steps, the sleep still in our eyes, and walking towards the low and unpretentious airport terminal. It was built of brown-red brick, and from the roof hung a large colour portrait of the late Chairman Mao. On either side were large red banners bearing white Chinese characters – no doubt they were political slogans. We walked in the cool morning air, taking in our new surroundings; although the sky was still slightly dark, the rising sun shone on the building, illuminating the stiff portrait and the garish banners. Several of us took photos; I produced my cine camera, but the film ran out.



Beijing Airport (PF)

We then entered the building, which was rather dark inside. There was no bustle or commotion; the atmosphere was relaxed and unhurried. We joined a short queue and had our passports checked by young women with pigtails, dressed in green army uniforms with red stars, who silently took our documents. They chatted and smiled among themselves, then solemnly returned them. Afterwards we joined another queue in order to submit questionnaires that we had filled in during the flight, stating how much money we had with us and listing any valuables that we had brought. This only took a few moments – and that was the end of the formalities.

Looking around, I noticed the number of young people (or at least people who looked remarkably young) who were working in the airport; all were dressed in what we called blue 'Mao' cotton suits or in green military uniforms. I could see no middle-aged people among them.

Next, we had to identify and collect our luggage in another room. The building in general looked rather old and the main colour scheme was brown. However, the place appeared to be spotlessly clean.

While we waited for our cases, we met our guides, who had come to greet us. There were two young men who would accompany us throughout our journey in China: Mr Yao and Mr Wei, two pleasant-looking and easy-going individuals wearing dark grey 'Mao' suits with characteristic high collars and pockets with buttons. Mr Yao was well built and rather athletic looking; Frank thought that he bore a passing resemblance to Muhammad Ali. Although quiet and shy at first, had a slight mischievous look in his eyes – perhaps a hint of what was to come. Mr Wei, on the other hand, was slightly taller and slimmer. Although a little more serious and more reserved, he was very polite. His facial features were quite different from his colleague's: they were more bony and his lips were thick. We noticed that he seemed to have a nervous twitch in his face, which usually appeared when he began to talk. He spoke good English, like Mr Yao, but it was delivered in a rather staccato manner. (Later I discovered that Mr Wei came from the south, and Mr Yao from Hangzhou, farther north, in the middle of the country.)

In addition, there were two guides who would show us around Beijing: a Mr Chang, a chap with a careless manner and a shock of wiry hair, and Mrs Sun, who was quite delightful. Everyone took to her as she looked so sweet and innocent, but she was always earnest, sincere, and ready with answers to all our questions. A helpful lady, she was on the go all the time.

We chatted to our guides, who asked us about ourselves and how we felt after our long journey. After our luggage had been identified, we ascended a staircase to the main entrance hall of the airport, where we found a huge statue of Chairman Mao, scroll in hand, surrounded by red banners and slogans in white characters. The statue was monolithic and stiff, and seemed to be carved out of a chalky white stone.

When we went outside and down the steps to a blue and grey coach that was waiting for us, the sun was higher in the sky, shining brightly; it was the start of a beautiful day. Mr O'Connor sat beside me in the bus and made some comments on the cleanliness of the vehicle. Before we set off, Mr Chang formally introduced himself and his colleagues, welcomed us sincerely, and told us a few basic facts, including what we could film and what we could not. We learned that photographing soldiers, military vehicles and equipment, trains with military coaches, and bridges, was prohibited. The introduction over, we were counted, and once everyone was satisfied, Mr Chang shouted 'zǒu ba!' ('let's go!') to the driver, and off we drove towards the city.

The journey was long and I spent it looking out of the window. We passed many blue-suited people cycling to work at an unhurried pace. We saw small groups of cyclists, and later saw more and more as we neared the city centre. For most of the journey the straight road, with young trees planted on either side, passed through flat countryside. We were told that the trees

had been planted in order to help reduce the dust blowing down from Mongolia's Gobi desert. Here and there were small farm buildings and houses built of light brown bricks; many of them had political slogans painted on them.

Soon the traffic became heavier, and more houses and people appeared as we approached the capital's suburbs. Many of the bicycles here had little trucks attached to the rear, or sidecars containing children. We also saw busloads of people tightly squashed together inside, and open lorries with groups of people standing in the back. Although some of the people were talking or joking with one another, most of them looked completely expressionless.



Cyclists in Beijing

In the suburbs we saw apartment blocks of mostly five or six storeys, built with the same light brown bricks used for the houses and farm buildings that we had seen earlier. In front of these and other buildings were small roughly-made wooden shacks on the pavements, placed between the trees. We were informed that these had been built in case of an earthquake, when people would be ordered to leave their apartments and take shelter in them. (We later learned of an earthquake that had occurred in a nearby city.)

The road on which we now travelled, long and straight like the road from the airport, was quite wide and very clean – we saw no litter anywhere. Here and there, especially at entrances to factories and residential areas, we saw red banners bearing white characters. Doubtless they were political slogans, for I recognized the characters 毛主席 (*Máo Zhǔxí* – Chairman Mao) everywhere. Also to be seen were bright red free-standing wooden boards bearing quotations from Mao's assorted writings.

As the traffic became heavier, we saw state cars (used as taxis for diplomats or foreigners), more lorries and more buses. The noise level also

increased, for everyone – including our driver – drove on the horn. Approaching vehicles were regularly saluted with horn blasts. The horns were also used to try to clear a way through the hundreds of cyclists, most of whom paid no attention to the racket until the last moment.

As well as people on the move everywhere, we also saw young and old doing physical exercises on the pavements, with the crowds milling around them. Here and there we saw elderly people doing their slow-moving 太极拳 (tài jí quán – Tai Chi) exercises on the pavements, oblivious to the bustle all around them.

We eventually turned on to Chang'an Lu ('Long Peace Avenue'), the longest and widest street in Beijing, running east-west. Despite the width of the road, it was crammed full of cyclists – I had never seen so many before. Policemen in white jackets and blue caps kept their eyes on the traffic, but did not stop it much. They constantly blew their whistles at the cyclists. Now and then we had to stop at traffic lights, which were manually operated by policemen in cabins perched high over the road.



Tiananmen Square, Beijing (PF)

On our way westwards along this road, our attention was drawn to various buildings and landmarks. We passed a large and shapeless brown building on our right: the Beijing Hotel. We then crossed the famous Tiananmen (Gate of Heavenly Peace) Square, where we saw the famous entrance to the Forbidden City with the huge portrait of Mao hanging over its archway. On each side of the entrance were large red banners containing yet more political exhortations, as well as stands with seats for dignitaries. On the other side of the square we caught a quick glimpse of the Museums of Chinese History and the Chinese Revolution, the Monument to the People's

Heroes, and the Great Hall of the People – all looking very massive and Soviet Russian in style.

Next came the Telegraph Building (more heavy Soviet architecture) with a large clock at the top, and the Nationalities Cultural Palace, a large white building with a green roof. Finally our hotel, on the right, was pointed out: the Min Zu or Nationalities Hotel. Our coach stopped at the large entrance, festooned with yet more red banners and white slogans, and we stepped out into the warm sunshine and looked around. We saw rows of spotless state cars parked in the grounds; their drivers were either polishing them or attending to their motors. As I stood there, taking in my surroundings, I realized that I had seen no privately-owned cars on the roads and no advertisements.

Assembled in the large and rather dark entrance lobby, Patricia took our passports, handed us slips of paper with the numbers of our rooms written on them, and read out today's schedule, which she had just been given. Still half asleep, we listened, aghast. In three quarters of an hour, at 8.00 a.m., we would be given a European breakfast; at nine o'clock we would visit the Forbidden City; lunch would be at two o'clock; at three o'clock we would be brought to a residential area to see how the ordinary people live, and at six we would attend a banquet given in our honour by the Minister of Tourism. I smiled to myself, for I had the feeling that we would be on the go as soon as we arrived, and was more or less prepared for such a punishing schedule. However, I think that many members of our party were not. I certainly was very keen to see the Forbidden City, but not on our very first morning!

Christopher and I found our way up to the ninth floor using the lift. We stepped out into a wide area, where there were armchairs and coffee tables; nearby was a receptionist's desk, from where keys could be obtained (a very Russian idea). However, we were told that our keys were already in the door of our room.

Our large room, painted pale blue, faced the back of the hotel, and so it was pleasantly quiet. It overlooked a wide, flat cityscape, though it was difficult to make out much detail as there was fine mosquito netting in front of the glass. On a small table between two armchairs was a large colourful thermos flask decorated with a picture of the hotel, which contained boiling water. Cups and a small caddy full of jasmine tea were also provided. Later we discovered slippers under our beds. On a desk was a calendar with room for notes, notepaper with the name of the hotel printed on it, envelopes, an old-fashioned dip pen, red and black ink, and a bottle of gum for sticking the stamps to the envelopes, as the stamps here were not self adhesive. By now it was clear that we had stepped back in time. Although the hotel in general looked old, it was spotlessly clean and homely.



Beijing cityscape (PF)

When our luggage was eventually delivered, we spruced ourselves up and made ourselves cups of tea. Christopher found it weak and watery, but I was used to the delicate flavour and enjoyed it.

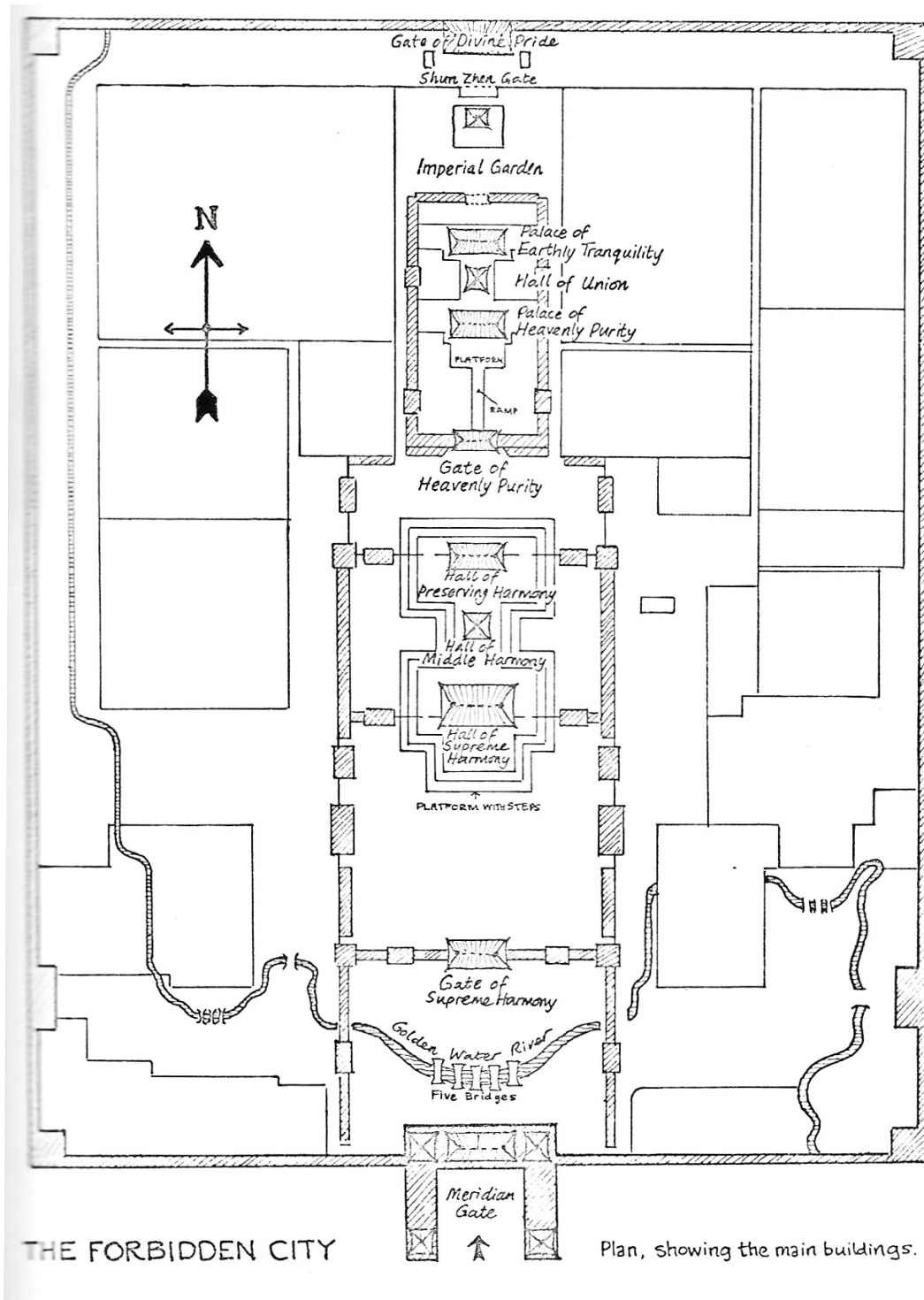
Downstairs we joined the others for breakfast in a huge dining room, where we were given fried eggs, toast, and tea or coffee. The waiters and waitresses were dressed in white jackets and blue trousers. To my eyes, the waitresses looked like young girls just out of school. The head waiter was quite comical, for he was short, stocky, and like a boxer in appearance. Whenever the slightest thing went wrong, he became very agitated, flinging his arms around.

After breakfast I returned to my room in order to wash my teeth and collect my cameras, then hurried downstairs. Most of us were in the coach by nine o'clock, but we had to wait for John and a few of the others. We felt very awkward about keeping our guides waiting, for they clearly expected strict punctuality. Patricia decided that if anybody did not show up on time in future, we would leave without them.

We were then driven off at great speed, and with much hooting of the horn, back to Tiananmen Square. As I was hoping to take a photograph of the famous gate, I was disappointed when we did not stop, but hooted our way through the crowds of people and drove quickly over the middle bridge and in through the central entrance.

Once inside the Imperial City (most the walls of which no longer existed), we hooted at more people to get out of the way, and quickly drove to the Meridian Gate. This was a very large dark red structure topped with yellow imperial roofs, which formed the entrance to what we call the Forbidden City, but now known to the Chinese as the Former Imperial Palaces. They had been built by one of the emperors of the Ming Dynasty in the 1400s. It was a wonderful feeling to realize that we were about to walk into such an

important area within the city, where only the emperor, his concubines, and eunuchs were allowed to be.



Before we entered, dates, figures and other information were rattled off by the delightful Mrs Sun, who knew all her facts off by heart. Added to all this was a certain amount of propaganda that she was obliged to tell us, such as that the palaces were built to serve the reactionary political purposes

of the feudal rulers; it was recorded that one hundred thousand artisans and one million labourers had built the palaces, and that in 1609, 9,300,000 taels of silver had been spent on felling trees for repairs – a sum of money that could have fed over eight million impoverished peasants for one year.

We then entered the Meridian Gate, in the south wall of the complex (all palaces and traditional houses were built on a north-south axis), and entered a vast square, filled with blue- and green-clad Chinese people. As hidden loudspeakers were blaring music and speech, it was quite noisy. The sun, now high in the sky, beat down on Imperial yellow roofs, red walls and marble; the magnificent architecture was in excellent repair. Groups of people posed for photographs with Ming architecture behind them. All the young people were very well behaved. They ambled around, gazing at everything (including us), chatted, sat in the sun, and always made way for us. As one of our guides explained, they were probably 'up from the country', on holiday.

Directly ahead of us was the splendid Gate of Supreme Harmony; the Golden Water River, spanned by five small bridges, formed a crescent in front of it. By now I was in my element, filming everything, and in danger of getting lost as I ran about in order to get the best shots available. No doubt our guides were keeping their eyes on me! I managed to keep track of our group, as I was able to pick out the tall Mr O'Connor, who very conveniently was wearing a white jacket.

After we had walked through the elaborate gate, which looked more like a small palace, we went down the steps on either side of a large stone slab on which an intricate depiction of dragons and clouds had been carved. We now found ourselves in another huge square, also packed with people. In front of us this time was the Hall of Supreme Harmony, a magnificent building quite similar to the Gate. We ascended the marble steps and from the wide balcony looked at some bronze animals and large gold-plated bronze cauldrons, once used to hold water in case of fire. We were told that troops of the Allied Forces had scraped off the gold with their bayonets in 1900. We then entered the cool and dark Hall, escaping from the heat and the racket from the loudspeakers. Here, in this main ceremonial hall of the Imperial Palace, we saw the Emperor's throne on a high platform, with steps leading to it. Tall wooden pillars supported the highly decorated beams of the roof high above us; everything else was gold and splendour. All we could do was gasp. Here, we were told, the Emperors gave audiences and received congratulations from their officials and vassals when first installed. The Hall had been built in 1669.

Mesmerized, we staggered out of the exit at the other side after the crowd of Chinese people who had been listening to our guide's explanations moved back to make way for us. We now found that we were on a raised

platform surrounded by marble balustrades and steps leading down to ground level. Straight ahead was the Hall of Middle Harmony, which had been restored in 1627 and 1765. We quickly passed through this small building, stopping briefly inside to admire a throne and two sedan chairs on either side of it. Here the Emperors would make their final preparations before entering the Hall of Supreme Harmony.



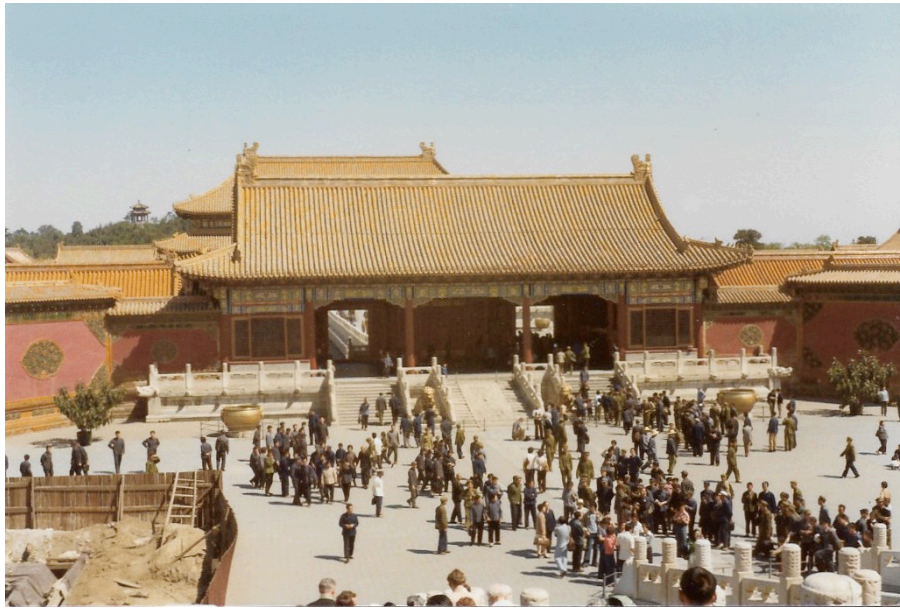
The Hall of Middle Harmony, The Forbidden City, Beijing

At the end of the platform we came to the beautiful Hall of Preserving Harmony, which had very intricate and colourful decoration under its elegant and sweeping yellow roof. Inside, we were quickly shown around a small museum containing artefacts dating from the Neolithic age to the 'Spring and Autumn' Period: bronzes, terracotta ware, inscriptions on oracle bones, jade, horn, and shells. Also included were skulls, weapons and even meals of Peking man (a species of *homo erectus*, now recognized as not being the origin of the Han or pure Chinese people).

Next we crossed another large courtyard, though not as big as the previous ones, and approached the Gate of Heavenly Purity, which was very elaborate and beautiful. From here, a long ramp led to the elegant Palace of Heavenly Purity, a rectangular building that had been built in 1420 but had subsequently burned down. It had been rebuilt in 1798. We peeped through the windows into a series of audience chambers, where foreign ambassadors had once been received.

Our next stop was at the small Hall of Union, in which we saw a large chiming clock with a European dial and Roman numerals, made in the 1700s.

This was placed to the left of a throne; on the right was a large clepsydra or water clock dating from the 1800s. Here we also saw some Imperial seals.



The Gate of Heavenly Purity, The Forbidden City, Beijing

Straight ahead was the Palace of Earthly Tranquillity, built in 1420 and restored in 1655. This was where the Imperial wedding nights were spent. We peered through the window at the wedding chamber, complete with its bed and furnishings. The last Manchu Emperor, Pu Yi, who had been expelled in 1924, hated this place and described it in his autobiography as 'stifling'. The other room, we were told, was used for sacrificing 1,300 pigs per year to the kitchen god.



The Gate of Earthly Tranquility, The Forbidden City, Beijing

After we had seen these luxurious buildings, we descended from the raised platform and walked to the Gate of Earthly Tranquillity, which led us into the Imperial Garden. This had been laid out during the famous Ming dynasty. We had been walking in a straight line all the time and now were at the northern end of the complex. In fact, we had only passed through the central section of the Forbidden City, for there were many more fine buildings to our left and right. We would have to return, Mrs Sun said, in order to see the jewellery halls and the concubines' lodgings. What splendour and luxury!



The Imperial Gardens

We now walked through a series of beautiful gardens, which were more intimate than the vast squares that we had crossed. Here we saw two old gnarled trees that had twisted themselves around each other, pavilions, natural rock formations, and pools. It was pleasantly cool and shady here.

Once we had passed through the Shun Zhen gate and the Gate of Divine Pride, we were outside the Forbidden City. In the upper section of this final and large gateway were the drum and bell that had been used to tell the time for the inhabitants. From here we saw Coal Hill, an artificial hill created by Kublai Khan using the excavated soil from three nearby lakes that he had had enlarged. Here, on the hill, was where the last Emperor of the Ming Dynasty had hanged himself in 1644, when peasant rebellions broke out.

Beside the main gate was a shop where we bought guides of the Forbidden City.



Coal Hill, The Imperial City, Beijing

At eleven o'clock we clambered on board our coach and were driven back to our hotel, where we rested until lunch at two o'clock. Some of us ordered European food, but most of us had the Chinese dishes. When we sat down, we discovered that the tables were much higher than at home. The waiters had sensibly provided us with knives and forks in case we could not manage to eat with the chopsticks. Starters included the famous 'hundred-year-old eggs'; various main courses, including chicken, vegetables and fish, were arranged in the middle of the table, and bowls of rice to our right. With these dishes we had a choice of *pí jiǔ* (beer) or *qì shuǐ* (orangeade). Soup, in a huge bowl, was placed on the table after the main courses, and we finished with fresh fruit, then tea or coffee. At the end of the meal, the young waitresses brought us hot damp cloths for wiping our hands and mouths. Although the meal and the service had been excellent, what surprised us was how carelessly the dishes had been plonked on the tablecloth, which meant that it was quite stained when we finished. However, when we left, the tablecloths were whipped off in order to be washed.

At three o'clock we set off again in the bus to the He Ping Jie (Peace Street) Residential Area, in the north of the city. During the journey we saw more of suburban Beijing, which was much the same as what we had seen this morning: boulevards with houses and small, old-fashioned shops behind the trees. Inside many of these shops and houses we could glimpse posters

of Chairman Mao and the new Chairman Hua; in the shops we could see old-fashioned scales being used.

On the way I asked Mrs Sun about education in China. She told me that students generally began school at 8 a.m. and continued, with a two-hour break for lunch, until 6 or 6.30 p.m. Primary schools, however, closed at around 4.30 p.m., and youngsters generally had a break of about ten or fifteen minutes after every lesson. Sport was played in the evenings.

We finally drove up a laneway and stopped in a yard surrounded by apartment buildings. When we clambered out of the bus, we were greeted by a man and some women, who all shook hands with us. Most of us tried our few words of greeting in Chinese: '*nǐ hǎo?*' ('how are you?'). We were brought inside one of the buildings, where we were led up a concrete staircase in need of repairs, and along a corridor that could have done with a fresh coat of paint. Although the place was dark and gloomy, it was spotlessly clean.

From here we were brought into a long room that overlooked the yard, and were applauded by some women who were there. The room contained a long table covered with a white tablecloth and surrounded by chairs. At each place was a mug with a lid on it, and in the middle of the table were cigarettes and matches for our use. The walls were quite bare, except for six coloured portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and Hua.

When we were invited to sit down, we found jasmine tea leaves in the bottoms of our mugs; ladies poured boiling water over them from large thermos flasks and topped up our mugs at regular intervals. A Mr Ma, the vice-president of the local street committee, introduced himself and his various comrades. Our guide, Mr Chang, interpreted everything that he said, and at every introduction we applauded. At first we were surprised that the people introduced also applauded, but we soon got used to this slightly unusual custom. Mr Ma sincerely welcomed us, using a formula that we would later hear again and again, and which generally ran as follows:

'On behalf of the revolutionary committee of (whatever institution it might be), we would like to extend a warm welcome to our Irish friends.' Applause. 'Although Ireland may be a small nation, we still have a lot to learn from you, and so we hope that the mutual understanding between our two countries will develop and increase.' Applause.

A detailed briefing about the residential area, replete with propaganda and political catch-phrases, followed; again, we would hear more of the same on countless occasions later. The main points of interest were that the thirty-odd blocks of flats in the area were owned by the State and that all of them had central heating; the people living in them were mostly workers, teachers and artists.

After the briefing, we were brought off to see the clinic. We were taken down shady pathways surrounded by trees; on the way we saw open spaces where the children could play, and also more earthquake shacks. In the clinic we were greeted by a few middle-aged women who applauded when we entered. When we quickly realized that it was the custom to applaud them as well, we returned the compliment. The clinic was small and basic; we were led into the back room and invited to sit down. On one of the walls were portraits of Mao and Hua, both looking for all the world like a couple of saints, as they appeared to have haloes around their heads! Here, a pleasant elderly woman dressed in a grey trouser suit and smiling all the time, gave us an introduction to the place. I was interested to discover that both Chinese and Western medications were used here; acupuncture was used for a number of ailments, such as headaches and toothaches.

Next we were brought to a small tailoring workshop, where the elderly lady workers stood up and applauded when we entered. One of them told us about the type of work that they did; they earned 31 yuan (£10) a month.



Inside the He Ping Jie Kindergarten, Beijing

After this we visited a kindergarten in another part of the residential area. When we entered, thirty or forty children, all colourfully dressed, jumped up and down frantically, shouting a greeting over and over again until we sat down on some tiny chairs. The cute children, aged between four and six, then sat down and we were told about the place. Parents paid the equivalent of about £4 per month to have their children sent here, fed, and looked after while they were at work.

Having been told this, a tiny, sweet girl stepped forward and, with a great show of confidence, announced that we would have some songs and dances for our entertainment. We were then treated to a excellent performance of dances, full of graceful movements, by both the boys and girls, and some very well sung songs, all accompanied by dreadful playing of an old and rather wheezy harmonium. Sadly, all the songs and dances had revolutionary themes: either they were paeans of praise for Mao and Hua, or about smashing the notorious Gang of Four (which included Mao's widow, Jiang Qing). We would hear much about this infamous gang during the next three weeks, for they were deemed to be responsible for everything and anything that had failed over the years. (As it was too soon after Mao's death for the authorities and populace to criticize him, I suspect that the Gang of Four were being used as a convenient scapegoat.)

Finally we split into three groups and visited two families each. Their apartments were basic; the first family had three bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen and a toilet. Posters, colour pictures and calendars hung on the walls, and the furniture was plain and functional. The son was at school, which he attended six days a week; he was interested in sports, and he liked to watch television and read in his spare time. In the second apartment we spoke to a middle-aged lady who had a family of six: four boys and two girls. One of the boys was at school, two were working, and the other was a soldier in the army. The lady worked in the kindergarten that we had visited earlier.

After our tour we returned to the room where we had been welcomed by Mr Ma. We were given more tea and invited to ask questions. Somebody asked if there were many cases of vandalism in the area. Our guides looked puzzled, for they did not understand the question; we had to explain what the word 'vandalism' meant. As they appeared to find the explanation just as mystifying, the term 'naughty boys' had to be used in order to get the gist of the question across to Mr Ma. His answer was simple: no, there was no vandalism in the area. He was then asked what would happen to people who had done something wrong. 'Indoctrination,' was the reply. 'We talk to such people and steer them back to the correct way of thinking, according to the principles of Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong thought'. Prison? 'Only for extreme cases, as a last resort'. (It was obvious that Mr Ma was well versed in Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong thought and all the lies and denials that went with it, for the so-called Cultural Revolution of 1966–76 was nothing more than a period of vandalism, when schools and businesses were closed and young Red Guards encouraged to intimidate adults, burn and smash everything they could find, and cause chaos over the whole country. However, most of us knew little of this at that time.)

At the end of our session, we shook hands, said 'zài jiàn' ('goodbye') to our hosts, clambered back into the bus, and waved as we set off for our hotel. Despite all the wordy speeches and explanations, we had enjoyed the afternoon.

In the hotel we prepared for this evening's banquet. At six o'clock we assembled and boarded the bus again. We were driven for a short distance down the road and dropped at a restaurant. As we entered, people stood back to let us pass by and smiled at us. We saw dining rooms packed with young and old people, all busily eating and chatting. We were brought upstairs and shown to a large room containing three large circular tables with white tablecloths.

Once seated and the meal begun, Mr Sing, the Minister of Tourism, introduced himself and greeted us in English. He then went on to give us a long speech in Chinese. A large bespectacled man, well built, and wearing a black suit, he spoke well. Mr Yao translated for us, though sometimes it was a little difficult to catch everything that he said, for he seemed to be rather nervous in the Minister's presence. Mr Sing gave us an outline of China's recent history, the revolution, the efforts needed to create a new growing nation, the setbacks, the achievements and, of course, the Gang of Four and their evil doings. He told us of the great things that had been done 'under the wise leadership of our great Chairman Mao' and the great things that would happen under 'the wise leadership of our great Chairman Hua, who smashed the Gang of Four with one blow'. (Hua would be packed off to the USSR shortly afterwards, and Deng Xiaoping would seize power.) Mr Sing then wished us a good stay in China, encouraged us to voice our opinions on how we were being treated, apologized for running us off our feet this morning and not giving us enough time to rest, and finally hoped that the friendship and mutual understanding between our two countries would be further increased – a phrase that we would hear often throughout our stay. After he had finished his speech, he proposed a toast, clinked glasses with everyone, saying 'gān bēi' ('bottoms up' or 'cheers').

After the following course, Mr O'Connor stood up and made an excellent speech on the spur of the moment, which was complimentary, sincere, and expressed all our feelings. Like Mr Sing, he concluded by proposing a toast. (Mr O'Connor had been with Mr Sing all afternoon, talking to him. He had found the session very monotonous, as Mr Sing had been very long-winded and formal.)

The meal was a very large one, and I soon lost count of how many courses we had – we must have had at least a dozen. We had *Běijīng kǎo yā* (Peking roast duck), crunchy stir-fried vegetables, pork, fish of various kinds, other tasty meats, and dishes that even our guides could not (or perhaps dared not) identify. At our table, Mrs Sun did all the serving and made sure that

everyone had enough; we were constantly asked if we wanted more. Despite the amount of food that we must have eaten, none of us felt really full afterwards. Once again, soup was served last, damp facecloths were given to us, and a large bowl of huge apples was placed in the middle of the table. I shared one with Mr Wei, who was sitting near me. We chatted noisily and enjoyed the banquet immensely.

It suddenly ended at eight o'clock, when Mr Sing stood up; this seemed to be the signal to leave. On the way out we all shook hands with Mr Sing and thanked him. I wished him goodbye and thanked him in Chinese. When Mr Yao told him that I could speak Chinese, Mr Sing, with customary flattery, told me that I spoke it very well. I made the customary denial, '*Bú duì, shuō de hěn bù hǎo*' ('No, I speak it very badly').

The bus was waiting for us outside, but as most of us decided to walk back to the hotel, only a few got on. The Brennans and I went on ahead, leaving the others behind. It was good to stretch our legs after such a big meal. It was a lovely evening and it was still warm. As we walked, people gazed at us. We saw quite a number of young people: girls holding hands and laughing, boys holding hands, and young couples holding hands. We had not expected to see this. Countless bicycles passed by – with no lights, as Mr Brennan observed. As the vehicles on the road were still honking their horns, the place was quite alive.

We soon arrived at our hotel. Needless to say, it was sheer joy to fall into bed after such a long and busy day.