

3 – BEIJING

Following a wakeup call at 5.30 a.m. for my Canadian room-mate, I got up at six and left three quarters of an hour later. I caught the 7 o'clock bus to the airport, where I met the French chap I had met three days before, and checked in. After we had gone through security, we sat outside and chatted a little. I then spoke to a Chinese man for a while. Later we boarded the plane and began an unremarkable two-hour journey to Beijing. As I had a window seat, I could see the scenery below. Once again, the journey was punctuated with the usual presents, drinks, and food. As I was feeling a little unwell this morning with diarrhoea, I did not eat much. Fortunately I managed to sleep a little.

We arrived in Beijing at 10.45, and after I had collected my luggage, I prepared for the long wait until the other members of the delegation arrived at about five o'clock in the evening. As tea did not seem to be available anywhere, I went upstairs to the departure area, bought a can of lemonade, and sat down to bring my diary up to date. When construction workers began to make a loud noise, I moved downstairs to the arrivals area. I continued writing and later spoke to some people. The hours passed quickly and in no time at all the British Airlines flight arrived. I stood with the crowd at the arrivals door and after a while caught sight of Pauline Jones and her familiar shock of red hair. She was accompanied by Pat Griffin, another member of the delegation. Moments later I was introduced to Ercus Stewart, a young man whom I had not met before.

Because there seemed to be nobody to meet us, we went over to the CITS counter where, using a mixture of English and Chinese, I asked if anybody was supposed to meet us. As they knew nothing about this, we went to another counter, where we were told to go to the hotel reservation desk; no information was available there either. Fortunately Ercus had a telephone number and rang a Mr Xing, a former ambassador, who spoke to him. Just as he did so, a large Chinese man approached us and asked if we were from Ireland. He introduced himself as Wang Chongxu, Deputy Chief of First Division European Department of Youxie ('Friendship' – the abbreviated form of Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries). He apologized for any confusion; naturally he had no way of identifying us, and had obviously not thought about identifying himself. He introduced us to a young lady, Miss Liu (whose manner did not

endear herself to me) and a young man in jeans named Mr Zhang. We were brought outside to a brand new and spotlessly clean Japanese minibus (what a luxury!) and driven gently along the familiar roads towards the capital. The weather was perfect here: sunshine filtered through the trees and the place almost looked idyllic. It was quite a change from the grimness that had greeted me some three weeks previously.

During the journey we chatted and exchanged all our latest news. It turned out that Mr Wang had been in Ireland with a delegation. On the plane to Beijing two Irish men talked to Ercus and the ladies; they said that they knew me and my father. When I heard their names, I realized who they were immediately. Like my father, both were keen horologists. Unfortunately, I had missed seeing them in the airport.

We drove for a long time along almost deserted streets (it was past rush hour) and suddenly turned down a narrow alleyway, then through a gateway. We got out and were shown into a comfortable, tranquil guest house. I was told that Chiang Kai-shek had once lived here. Ercus and I had a fine bedroom with all the usual facilities, including a television set. This certainly made a change from the usual impersonal hotels!

We were given about twenty minutes to freshen ourselves up and then went to the dining room for dinner at seven o'clock. This was a pleasant enough meal, though nothing special. While we ate, I told the others about my experiences. Later we went out for a stroll along the main road. Back in the guest house, I repacked my bags, putting my rucksack away and moving all my good clothes into the suitcase. I then returned to my diary, but finally put it aside as I was tired and ready for bed.



Mr Zhang, Miss Liu, Ercus, Pauline, and Pat

After an excellent sleep and an almost cough-free night, I was woken at seven by the alarm clock. We had breakfast at 7.30 (toast, eggs, and tea)

and – amazingly – were free until nine. I used the time to wash some clothes. We had to wait for fifteen minutes for the minibus – Mr Zhang and Miss Liu apologized for the delay. This was quite different from the punctuality of our guides ten years ago! We drove out of the city, heading westwards, and finally reached the Summer Palace at about ten o'clock. Having missed seeing this ten years ago, I was very interested to visit it now.

We parked beside other tourist coaches and got out. Mr Zhang bought our tickets and in we went. The place was seething with tourists and was a riot of colour and confusion. Passing a group of Chinese people who were dropping coins into big water cauldrons in order to see if they would float or sink, we passed through an over-ornate gateway, which I found far too gaudy outside and dull inside. I realized that this certainly was representative of the worst period of Chinese architecture: the structure would have undoubtedly been built in the closing years of the Qing dynasty, possibly in the nineteenth century. We walked around the interior quickly and then left for the famous lake. I caused not a little consternation by lagging behind and taking pictures at my leisure. I couldn't care less; I wasn't going to be whisked around at top speed. Mr Zhang seemed to be quite good humoured about this, but Miss Liu was not at all amused. I heartily cursed this touristy approach – it just wasn't my style.



The lake and long passageway in the Summer Palace, Beijing

I just barely had enough time to snap some photographs of the lake before we were taken at a brisk pace through the famous long passageway (which looked far too new and fresh for my liking) and towards the Temple of Longevity up the side of a hill. Miss Liu called out to us, 'We must hurry!' We scrambled up the steps to the top in the heat, which left me tired and breathless after having eaten so little yesterday; once or twice I felt that I was about to collapse. On reaching the temple at the top, I thought about

taking a photo, but we were already on the way downhill, though this time by a different route. We passed another temple close to the main one, which featured a crazy rock formation that tumbled down the hillside. A Chinese guide nearby pressed a button on his loudhailer, which blasted forth an inane tune to attract his group of tourists, and deafened us. I stuck my fingers in my ears by way of protest.



The marble boat in the Summer Palace, Beijing

Down by the lake again, we walked to the famous marble boat. This turned out to be a big disappointment, for nobody was allowed to get on it and our view of it was obstructed by a real boat. However, we did obtain a slightly better view of it by passing through a shop, where I bought a packet of postcards of the place for just ¥2 RMB. Our guides bought cartons of soft drinks for us and then we walked back behind Longevity Hill. Our visit was over by 11.45. I was disgusted; I realized that I had been in the place, but that I most certainly had not seen it properly.

It turned out that the reason for our hurried visit was the time at which our lunch had been booked. We now hastened to a hotel situated in the nearby Fragrant Hills. It did not take us long to get there; on the way we passed the famous grand canal to Xi'an. The location was nice, but the ultra-modern hotel was bursting with businessmen and tourists. We changed money here and bought stamps before going upstairs to the restaurant. The food was excellent, though I found some of it a little too spicy for my liking. I was unused to such extravagant meals after three weeks of simple fare!

We did not delay long afterwards, but set off for the nearby Temple of the Sleeping Buddha. This was built on the hillside and was suitably spectacular, but once again the architecture was too gaudy for my liking. An unusual statue of a reclining Buddha was rather nasty, thanks to the

application of too much bright paint. We did not stay long here, though we did linger a little in the garden.

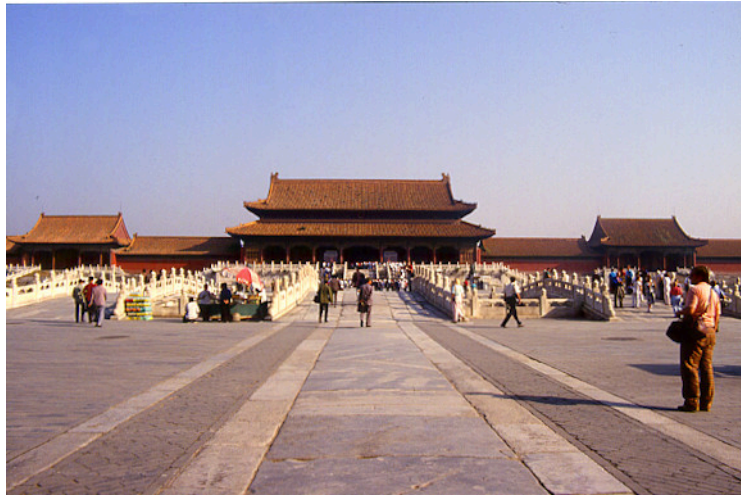
Shortly afterwards we left and drove back to the city centre. We stopped at the White Peacock Art World department store, where we could do some shopping. The others were interested, but I was not. I just bought a couple of gaudy dolls at ¥5 FEC each and, as nothing else in the six-storey shop interested me, I left early and walked by the canal nearby, stopping to rest in the shade. I was first back in the bus, and noticed that our guides were becoming visibly angry as the others didn't turn up until about ten minutes after the appointed time. It was obvious to me that these guides were not particularly interested in their jobs and were anxious to get back home. When the others appeared, their forced politeness was quite obvious. I was quite surprised to discover that Mr Zhang had only been in the Summer Palace once before, probably when he was quite young, and therefore had not known where to go. I was annoyed at the way our day had been organized; we could have seen the Sleeping Buddha in the morning, had our lunch at the appointed time in the nearby hotel, and then seen the Summer Palace at our leisure in the afternoon. We now arrived back at our guest house at 4.30 p.m. – two hours before dinner. I spent the spare time sitting out in the garden writing postcards, during which Paddy and Eithne Brennan arrived.

I joined the others at 6.30 p.m. for dinner, though Paddy and Eithne arrived late this time. They gave me news from home and asked me about my travels. I spent the whole meal telling them where I had been, and later moved out to the foyer with them to continue my story. As the others had heard it all before, they went out for a walk.

After I had finished, Paddy asked me to have a look at a speech in Chinese, written for him by Prof. Tao Kiang, which he hoped to read after various functions and dinners. As he just could not manage to pronounce the words properly and with the correct tones, I rewrote it using more phonetic spellings and with the tone accents emphasized. I then returned to my postcards and diary, with a break to talk to Ercus when he came back from his walk. I finally brought the diary up to date and went to bed at 12.30 a.m. Although I was happy to have seen the Summer Palace, it had been a rather frustrating day because of the way we had been rushed from place to place.

After breakfast this morning I returned the re-written speech to Paddy and attended to a few things before we were collected at nine o'clock. Our hosts arrived on time this morning, but we were delayed by the guest house staff wanting their registration forms filled in. We finally set off at 9.15 to the Forbidden City, which was not far away. We approached it from the north, swung around by the east, and stopped at the main entrance on the south

side, entering before we had reached the more traditional approach via Tiananmen Square.



The Gate of Supreme Harmony and detail, the Forbidden City

It was a bright, sunny morning, but at this early hour it was pleasantly cool. Mr Zhang bought the elaborate tickets and we went into the first square which, although familiar, looked smaller than I had remembered it to be. I was delighted to be back here again. As we walked towards the Gate of Supreme Harmony over one of the five bridges, I began taking photos. I just had to, for the architecture of the buildings was so photogenic. Again, we moved fairly quickly, but I didn't mind as Mr Zhang was keeping his eye on me. Interestingly, I found the interiors of the various buildings distinctly repugnant this time, as they were so dark and dreary. Members of the public were no longer allowed to walk through most of the main buildings now; railings had been installed in doorways so that visitors could only peer in. This did not bother me too much. At the approach of the Hall of Supreme Harmony, I noticed grass growing between the cobblestones to the left and

right of the main thoroughfare – just as it had been ten years ago. On we went; some of the following buildings were enveloped in scaffolding and were undergoing restoration. However, the small Hall of Middle Harmony was still visible.



View towards the Meridian Gate and the western section, Forbidden City

When we approached the entrance to the private imperial apartments, we turned off for the western section of the complex, where the buildings were smaller, more intimate, and not so well restored. We examined a building where the young emperors had resided; curiously, it was not very impressive. We poked around this quiet corner for a little while, then crossed over to the eastern section, where we visited an exhibition of Western and Chinese clocks belonging to the emperors. Most of them were very large and rather too ornate, though they were interesting to see. Afterwards, we went into a tacky souvenir shop where my companions wanted to change money and do some shopping. I amused myself outside by snapping pictures of the people milling about. They were certainly a very colourful bunch this time: as well as the locals, there were plenty of Japanese, European and American tourists.



Eastern section

At last the others emerged and off we went to another complex of exhibition halls, also in the eastern section. Here we could see buildings that must have been in almost their original condition, as most of the paint had faded. Although they looked run down, I found them quite charming. In these rooms we saw various collections of artefacts, some good, though mostly hideous: various religious objects, imperial robes, armour for the emperor made of thousands of tiny steel plates covered in embroidered material, and an extraordinary mattress made of ultra-thin strips of ivory woven together. Another suite of long rooms contained a poor collection of Ming dynasty paintings. Undoubtedly the best items had been taken out of the country; our guides refrained from telling us that when the Nationalists fled to Taiwan in 1947, they took seven train-loads of antiques with them.

Gradually we made our way to the familiar northern gate with its view towards Coal Hill, where we once again boarded our bus. We now drove along the busy streets to the Peking Duck Restaurant, an old but homely place, where we were met by various officials, including the Vice President of Youxie and his wife, and Noel Kilkenny (the Irish Chargé d’Affaires) and his wife. I sat between Mr Zhang and Mme Xing, who was the wife of Mr Xing, a former Chinese Ambassador in Ireland. Before our meal, the Vice President of Youxie welcomed us in a hackneyed speech containing the familiar words, ‘Friendship between our two countries’. Paddy stood up and replied in like manner, ending with his Chinese speech (not too bad!) and a proposal of a toast.

We then quickly demolished tasty dish after tasty dish, ending with delicious Peking roast duck. True to form, the meal ended abruptly after we had finished. We said goodbye to everyone, walked downstairs with the Kilkennys, and left in our bus.

We were then driven to a large, clean and impressive residential area in the east of the city, where we were met by an official and given a briefing about the place. This brought back memories of our experiences ten years previously. Although the place was far better than anything that we had seen all those years ago, I felt that it was not at all typical of normal Chinese residences, as I had seen far worse in Chengdu. The briefing was typical: our host spoke enthusiastically in short bursts, allowing for translation, while we sipped tea and availed of the cigarettes. As before, it all felt very contrived. At one stage, we were asked what we worked at; I replied in Chinese, which surprised them all! We were invited to ask questions, which seemed to be answered honestly this time.

After the briefing we were shown around the place, which was quite extensive, and (of course) brought to see a kindergarten. Here the children sang songs for us, but this time we had none of the elaborate dancing or

ridiculous revolutionary stuff that we had had to watch previously. This time the tiny tots seemed rather lifeless and lacking in smiles. Were they frightened or had they seen too many tourists? Even when let loose later (we saw them playing outside before we left), they seemed rather listless. Their minders and teachers were rather shapeless, moon-faced women in white uniforms, one of whom had accompanied the songs on a typically wheezy harmonium.

We now said 'Zài jiàn' ('Goodbye') to the children and were taken off to see the apartment blocks, which all looked very new and clean. We were brought upstairs to one of the apartments, which was simply furnished but spotlessly clean and neat. Indeed, it looked too good to be true! With the help of our guides, we chatted to the family, though mostly to the mother and father, both of whom must have had good jobs in the past. We were told that their son was a carpenter and that he had made much of the furniture in the few small rooms that they lived in.

After we had looked around the rooms (we noticed no sign of a bathroom or toilet), we left for another apartment, where we were introduced to a small, plump and jolly lady, who spoke very good English. She was originally from Shanghai and her husband, whom she had lost recently, had worked in Beijing. She was a lovely lady, full of life and laughter. She had started to learn English just four years previously from the radio and television. We all got on extremely well together and could have talked forever, but our conversation was abruptly terminated by our guides. She shook hands with all of us, kissed us, and seemed genuinely sorry to see us go as she had little opportunity to practise her English. When she said goodbye to Ercus and me, she told us that if she were younger, she would fall in love with us!

We now walked around the corner and out on to the street, where we were shown the shops that had been built as part of the complex. We went in to one of them to buy presents; the women bought straw hats to keep off the sun.

After this spending spree, we walked back to our bus and were driven to our guest house. After Ercus and I had spruced ourselves up, we went out for a walk, hoping that we might meet the money changer at the corner, but we did not. We ambled up to a department store that had a photographic department upstairs, but they did not sell slide film. We spent a little bit of time here, then returned to our guest house for dinner.

Later we were collected and driven to a theatre for tonight's entertainment: a Peking opera. Originally we were supposed to be going to a dance drama called 'The Silk Road', but tickets were not available for this. I was glad, for although the 'opera' would be more raucous, it would be more genuine. The venue turned out to be old and dingy – just the right sort of place for a traditional performance. It was filled mostly with elderly local

people, though there were some younger folk and plenty of foreign tourists. Some Americans had arrived dressed much too formally for such an occasion.

The performance began with a humorous sketch entitled '*Sān Chà Kǒu*' ('The Meeting of Three Roads') in which two characters, apparently staying at an inn, mistook each other for thieves, and began to fight each other in the dark. All of it was very cleverly mimed, with hardly any props; some of the acrobatics were quite astounding. This drew a great reaction from the crowd, though some people, both Chinese and tourists, began to walk out almost immediately. The typically loud cymbal crashes and accelerating clicks on a woodblock may have proved to be too tedious for them to listen to.

The second item was more elaborate, though somewhat more static and a good deal longer. The costumes were quite astonishing. This was entitled '*Dà Bǎo Guó*' ('Protecting the Nation'). A princess with a most unusual voice (undoubtedly played by a man) bemoaned the death of her husband the emperor, and tried to wrest power, now held by her ministers, and give it to her young son. There was much discussion, coming and going, and singing of songs by various characters, while the problem was debated. Our chief interpreter, Mr Wang, found the plot difficult to follow because of the use of classical Chinese. As the theatre had by now become so hot and airless, most of us fell asleep, including myself. Consequently we were greatly relieved when the play ended and we decided to leave. There would be more after the interval, but it would be all much the same, Mr Wang told us.

As we arrived at our guest house rather early in the evening, we all went to the Brennans' suite to chat, drink tea, and eat shortbread and watermelon. We stayed here for a while, then repaired to our own rooms, where I wrote my diary and went to bed. This evening the right side of my rib cage had been hurting me for some strange reason. Although I found it uncomfortable to lie on my right side, I soon fell into a deep sleep.