



China: Close Encounters of Another Kind

[Second of a two part series by Candis Boyer Cox]

Being a language teacher, I was fascinated with what I learned about the languages spoken in China. It was strange for me to be in a country where I could not speak. My own communication consisted of smiles and nods, gestures and pointing. I learned words for hello, thank you, some numbers and colors, and a few things to eat. Although China has a number of major languages, Mandarin, the language of Peking, is the official one. The peoples of Hong Kong speak Cantonese. Hacaw, Min, and Wu are other major languages. Many villages have their own separate languages. They are related with common historical roots as are the Romance Languages, but not mutually understandable.

Mandarin is tonal, which means that a word's entire meaning changes according to the stress. There are no conjugations for person or time in verbs, but there is a similar word order to English. One professor told us that a good teacher can teach one Mandarin faster than French! I wonder if we should have a contest! The unique characteristic of the ideographic writing system, meaning that a character represents a unit of meaning and not a sound, is that people of any language in China can read the characters and understand them with their own sounds. This fascinated me. Their written system, therefore, serves as an unparalleled unifying element among all the languages. All literate people can communicate through writing even though they cannot understand each other's speech.

Chinese is one of the oldest and richest written languages of the world. Some characters are 3,500 years old and remain unchanged. Because of the difficulty of mastering the language, an educated person is greatly respected. These Chinese as a whole have a drive for education that is unparalleled anywhere else in the world. To be minimally literate a person must memorize a minimum of 1,000 characters. He must know 5,000 to 6,000 to read a newspaper, and 20,000 to be a scholar. Considering that each character can have from one to thirty-two strokes, learning the thirty-two strokes, learning them is an awesome task.

By far the cultural highlight was Peking, now called Beijing,

in the new spelling which sorely closely approximates the Mandarin sound. Just getting there from Tianjin, near the port of Hainggang, by train was an experience. I went straight into the countryside, nearly face to face with peasants, water buffalo, railroad workers, donkeys, children, and the very different scenes of agricultural versus city living. The communes, walled compounds of villages, rice paddies, canals, fish hatcheries, bicycle paths, pine trees lining the tracks and roads, mulberry bush fields (silk worms feed on mulberry leaves), all give the impression of a much older, unchanging, less crowded life. I envied the rural people their space, beautiful surroundings, and clean air, in spite of their life-style even more primitive than in the cities.

Peking, Shanghai, and Tianjin are all so large that the central government administers them directly. Peking, the ancient imperial capitol, has much more in the way of palaces, monuments, and shrines as reminders of its past than the other cities. We were there for the celebration of National Day, October 1. To stand in the middle of Tian'anmen Square which holds 1,000,000 people and look over its vast expanse flanked by a memorial to Mao, the legislative building, and a gate to the entrance of the Forbidden City, and watch thousands of families walking, flying kites, spoiling and taking pictures of their few children, all looking healthy and happy, was a remarkable experience.

Three highlights of Peking were the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven, and the Summer Palace. The Forbidden City, called Zijin Cheng, also known as the Imperial Palace or Gugong, is an entire complex, an abiding symbol of traditional China. The walled city covers an area of 250 acres, making it China's most imposing architectural masterpiece (the Great Wall being in a different category altogether) even though it is characterized by simplicity and symmetry of design. Mongol rulers of the fourteenth century chose the site, construction occurred primarily in the early fifteenth century, and succeeding emperors and armies alternated between renovating and sacking the complex.

Located as a rectangular complex in the heart of Peking, it comprises six main palaces,



Old Man at the Summer Palace

many smaller buildings, and wide open spaces for a total of over 9,000 rooms. Everything in China is vast! Commoners and foreigners could never enter the Imperial Palace, residence for the emperor, his wives, concubines, ministers, officials and thousands of artisans and servants, and pain of death. Only since "liberation" in 1949 has it been open to ordinary

people as a public park. Vast quantities of its precious art objects were looted by both the Japanese and the Chinese Nationalists, and much was taken to Taiwan.

Enough remains, however, to gain an insight into the daily life of these privileged people.

The Temple of Heaven, known as Tiantan, is a fifteenth century architectural master-

piece consisting of three main round temples in a vast park enclosed by walls. Each year of the day before the winter solstice the emperor would leave the Forbidden City for the Temple of Heaven to pray for good harvests. Surrounding the main temple is a circular echo wall constructed so that two people standing at exactly opposite points along the wall can hear each other speak by whispering on the stones.

My personal favorite sight of Peking, perhaps of the entire trip, was the Summer Palace, known as Yiheyuan. The vast palace grounds border a lake, and the whole area served as the summer residence for many imperial households. The notorious Dowager Empress Ci Xi (pronounce it See-She) spent all the silver intended to fund the royal navy for the construction of the current palace in 1888. China may or may not have a different history with a stronger navy, but I am glad Ci Xi built the Summer Palace so that I could enjoy its beauty. It was the only place I visited where I could identify a feminine touch in design and atmosphere.

We had heard that a previous tour group had not been permitted to visit the Great Wall because they complained about their accommodations. I had a three-day nagging fear that one of our group would do the same (after all the Chinese and American concepts of modern comfort are not even remotely close), and that I

(Continued on Page 4)



The Marble Boat at the Summer Palace



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