

LETTER FROM BEIJING BY LEONARD ZAMOR



People get up early in Beijing;* as soon as dawn breaks the city begins to stir. In the chill mist of early morning the main roads into the city are choked with a continuous stream of bicycles, cars and buses crammed to bursting.

On the sidewalks the vendors begin to set up their stalls. Life gets going once again. I landed on the planet China only a little while ago, always on the look out for what is exotic and different. Already I have a tale to tell which no doubt reveals my naivete and my preconceptions.

My early morning wanderings take me to Tiantan in the park of the Temple of Heaven. This huge park, which dates from the Ming period, is one of the best places in the capital to relax. Once the day begins people gather there to play cards, practice Tai Chi, listen to music. My presence attracts a certain amount of attention – surprise rather than curiosity and a few incredulous smiles. But soon everyone turns back to whatever he or she is doing. In one of the galleries in the park – and this is a sign of the times – a group of men and women of a “certain age” are learning to dance rock and roll to the strains of an old French hit “Promenez-vous sur la Costa del Sol.” It is ten below zero.

Mrs. Deng, a healthy, smiling sixty-year old, teaches nutrition. She tells me that for the last year disco has replaced Tai Chi as the morning exercise for members of her institute. She thinks this is all to the good. “It stirs the blood,” she says, as she goes back to the dance. “It stirs the blood,” could equally well describe the effects on China of the political reforms which Deng Xiaoping introduced ten years ago. After thirty years of Maoist sclerosis, China decided to open its doors to the outside world and modernize itself internally in order to become “richer and stronger.”

In the course of an ordinary walk in Beijing one comes across a great number of private businesses run by individuals or collectives, and one sees well-stocked free market stores and all sorts of pedlars. Certainly one of the success stories of the economic reform is the rekindling of the traditional Chinese talent for free enterprise – an object of con-

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tempt under Mao. The numbers speak for themselves. According to the English-language newspaper, *China Daily*, more than 24,000 new businesses were established in Beijing in 1988, bringing the total to 106,000. These enterprises are mainly in the service sector – small stores, transport, restaurants.

On Wangfujing, one of the main shopping streets in Beijing, there are hectic preparations for the “spring festival” – Chinese New Year. A brightly dressed crowd is milling around, anxious to buy food and gifts and, of course, fireworks. Many shops display goods that most Chinese can only dream about: Swiss watches, micro-computers, washing machines and so on. One often has the impression wandering the shopping streets of Beijing that this array of consumer goods is just a flashy facade. China is trying to look modern without spending too much money.

An opening to the outside world? Yes, that is happening. But most of all, that means a fascination with everything American, whether it be the English language, disco music, or the dollar.

Not far from Beijing’s Buddhist monastery, young Chinese line up to taste a slice of America from the recently opened Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet. So, as often happens in Third World countries, a desire to copy America leads people to adopt the worst side of US life. Nevertheless, Chinese society does seem a bit more open, a bit more varied and also a bit more individualistic, now that a certain amount of originality is no longer treated as reprehensible behaviour to be discouraged.

Reform has not been without problems: already there are signs of the economy skidding out of control and of social instability.

First of all there is inflation, and while it is true that initially economic reform led to an increase in the average income, this has not kept pace with the dizzy rise in prices. Since 1984 the government has introduced free pricing for various goods in order to stimulate productivity. As a result, the rate of inflation which was three percent in 1984, is now more than twenty-five percent and has even reached sixty percent for certain items such as fruit and meat. There is growing discontent, particularly among the workers, and so the government has decided to postpone any further freeing of prices for at least two years. Businesses now have to make a profit and they cannot retain workers who are not productive. This means an increasing number of young people are “waiting for a job,” to use the accepted euphemism. Thus the two capitalist evils of unemployment and inflation have appeared in China and this has soured morale generally.

Reform has also produced a new privileged class of technocrats, entrepreneurs and traders. Take for example the case of a small-time trader who sells shirts on the sidewalks of Beijing. He may earn up to 200 yuan (about

\$60) a day, more than twice the monthly salary of a worker or even a university professor. After thirty years of relative economic equality these differences are difficult to accept, particularly since times are hard. Despite improvements over the last ten years, daily life is still hard for the great majority of the Chinese, and is fraught with all kinds of miseries, major and minor: extremely bad housing, harsh treatment by a contemptuous bureaucracy, difficulty in moving about and an overburdened railway system. To succeed in leaving Beijing by train is like winning a lottery. I had to wait three days before I could go on to my next destination.

The government speaks to the people, which took its promises of democracy literally, of a “democratic, popular dictatorship.” This somewhat surreal notion is used to justify and perpetuate the existence of the one-party state under Communist control. Its leaders, while preaching the cause of liberalization, have not hesitated to launch numerous attacks on “bourgeois liberalism” and on “spiritual pollution” in the cultural sphere. Add to this the sometimes violent repression of ethnic minority nationalist movements, most notably in Tibet, and we are left with the image of a government which fears that the reforms it has launched are a threat to its legitimacy, and which is determined to ensure its own survival at any cost.

There is a Chinese proverb, “When one lives in honey one doesn’t know the taste of sugar.” Thanks to an open-door policy which has facilitated commercial and cultural exchanges with the outside world, and also to the availability of a much wider range of information, the Chinese have become more aware of their country’s backwardness. They now know “the taste of sugar” and they want more. □

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*Editor’s note: this story was filed from China before the beginning of student demonstrations in late April.