

A China diary



Cover story continued

outsider of the city are alive with peasants bringing their produce into markets in town. The most amazing numbers and kinds of vehicles vie noisily with each other—carts and wagons pulled by donkeys or home-built engines, rickshaws, tractors, Russian-style trucks and buses that pour out clouds of black smoke.

Then, of course, there are the bicycles—literally millions of them. Every family owns one. They are heavy (about ten kilos) one-speeds built to carry huge loads. Our fancy ten-speeds wouldn't survive a week's work in China. Enormous baskets of vegetables, manure scraped off the city streets, squawking

"The city of Beijing is like a vast, sprawling village."

chickens and ducks, wives, mother-in-law and babies, indeed, every imaginable load is somehow precariously hung or carted along behind. I saw one strong farmer with five long-suffering goats strapped up and piled on top of one another on a rack over the rear wheel. No one but me thought it the least bit unusual.

The city of Beijing is like a vast, sprawling village. Except in the very central core, it is half urban and half rural, lush fields and ponds interspersed with apartment complexes. The tallest buildings are 15 to 20 storeys high, but they are rare. Frequent earthquakes limit the height.

In the city core, much of the housing is still an endless maze of the traditional, one-storey walled courtyard style. It is mostly badly run down. Weeds spring out of cracks in the roof tiles,

while the ugly gray plaster of the walls crumbles. There is almost no grass anywhere, although the streets are lined with hardy trees. A constant pall of smoke hangs over the city, sweet with the smell of burning wood rather than automobile exhaust. The colors of modern Beijing blend from dusty orange to dull gray to sickly, muddy brown. Other than the boundless variety and vitality of its population, there is little to call beautiful.

It is not, as it has often been called, the ugliest capital. Much of China is very poor and drab by the standards of our own spectacular cities, but nowhere does one find the kind of obscenity of the slums of Mexico or the Third World. No matter how ugly the housing may appear, the fact that Chinese society has mitigated that kind of despair is infinitely more beautiful than the shiniest of skyscrapers.

In Beijing we trained twice and did a small demonstration. With only a single day's notice, five or six thousand spectators showed up. Our gymnastics team was one of the first from the West to visit China (1973) and is always warmly received.

From there we flew to Shanghai for four days of hard training. Unlike Beijing, there is little sightseeing to do there. It is a huge (11.6 million people), gritty, industrial city, remarkably Western in appearance. Much of its architecture is a legacy of the pre-revolution days of British domination.

We did take a boat cruise along its vast, congested harbour. A brief glimpse of the naval yards there would be enough to thoroughly dishearten those who see China as a nascent superpower. The many submarines and military vessels docked there looked, at best, like

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World War II surplus. Ironically, considering Shanghai's history, there were three enormous foreign warships anchored nearby—British!

Most of our spare time we spent shopping. China is probably the least expensive country in the world. By the time we left we'd all bought so much artwork, silk and clothes that as a group our luggage for the plane was hundreds of kilograms overweight.

Our next stop was Tokyo. It is a monstrosity of a city that is the perfect contrast to everything we

Tokyo: noise and abundance.

saw in China. The assault on one's senses—the noise, lights, the crush of people and traffic—exceeds even New York. Yet unlike New York, it exudes an air of wealth and prosperity. One can see, for example, from the incredibly variety of cameras, watches and electronic gadgets that is on sale that Japan is at the forefront of the technological

revolution and is reaping the benefits.

We stayed in a luxurious hotel in the heart of one of Tokyo's many 'downtowns'. From there we commuted to workout at two different universities for four days. The price of the subway definitely makes you regard the TTC as a bargain. Indeed, the price of virtually everything there makes you cringe. Steak, for instance, is commonly twenty dollars a pound. And (not that we athletes ever partook of such things) a glass of beer in a restaurant is five dollars, while at a nightclub you could consider yourself lucky to get any drink for less than ten.

The team officially departed on the 14th, but our group from York continued on from there to visit assistant coach Maosaki's home town near Hiroshima. It is five hours by the 'Bullet' train. Even at 160 kilometers per hour, the ride is as smooth and comfortable as an airplane, and probably, considering how far airports are from the city center, faster.

Maosaki's parents put us up for three nights. We enjoyed tremendous hospitality from them and the people of that small town. They took us around the area, including a trip to the Peace

Museum and Park at the sight of the first atomic bomb explosion. We even received an Olympic commemorative medal from the local gym club that far outclasses what our own government gave us.

It was interesting to get to see the Japanese countryside. Fifty years ago it must have been very beautiful. Industrialization however, has not been kind to it. There is scarcely a hill now that is not laced by power lines, nor a view that is not marred by the clutter of urbanization. Most of Japan is actually thickly forested mountains, reminiscent of Vancouver Island. What little usable land there is is therefore unbelievably overcrowded. After ten days I was suffering from acute claustrophobia because of it. Little wonder that Japanese tourists flock to see the wild empty spaces of western Canada.

To finish off our trip we stopped off in Hawaii for four recuperative days. Of course it was as sunny and spectacular as every, but still, after three weeks we were all impatient to come home. Truly nothing makes one appreciate Canada so much as a prolonged absence from it.

Next week, the political changes in China.



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