

OLD PEKING, NEW BEIJING

Sunday, 2 June 2002: I land in the heavy smog that engulfs Beijing. Full thirteen years have flown by since I left during martial law on the eve of the Tiananmen massacre. The airport gleams high-tech. Plenty of trolleys and no charge.

At customs a continuously rolling screen warns against the corruption threatening China: THE FRONTIER INSPECTORS REFUSE ALL KINDS OF PRESENTS ... PASSENGERS SHOULD REPORT ANY WHO ACCEPT BRIBES.

Dior, Chanel, Lancôme: all the brand names tussle for trade. As I descend on the escalator, I disappear beneath a provocative advertisement of a woman with legs outstretched. So this is the new liberated city.

Outside in the humid heat of over 30°C taxis are ticking over — a passenger's air-conditioned paradise compared with the 1980s when taxis were scarce. On the broad tree-lined

airport road I recall the banner I saw in 1989 declaring: DOWN WITH LI PENG, then the despised prime minister. The banner has gone. Instead, a new tollway. Nearby snuggle the suburban oases marketed to expatriate families as 'Dragon Villas', 'Dynasty Garden' or 'Beijing Riviera' — villas and apartments set in sculptured gardens with amenities from swimming pool and gym to supermarket and school. Closer to the city, cranes and cladding everywhere testify to Beijing's building boom.

Then, via a bewildering mass of interweaving concrete flyovers, overpasses and underpasses, I'm alongside the Motorola and Hewlett Packard Towers and soon cruising down the former bicycle path of the ten-lane avenue that leads to the familiar comfort of the Jianguo Hotel.

In 1983 the relatively small foreign community was divided into pre-Jianguo and post-Jianguo categories. As the new Australian Broadcasting Corporation correspondent, I was fortunate to fall in the latter. It spared me the hardships that prevailed for Westerners before China's first joint venture hotel. Not that I craved luxuries. No. But I couldn't buy basic items such as plastic wrap, pantyhose or Kleenex tissues. The opening of the Jianguo with its bakery at least offered an edible loaf of bread.

A pianist is still at the keyboard while guests gossip at tables in the carpeted lobby. Compared with the dozen or more cavernous high-rise five-star hotels now available, the Jianguo is intimate. I picture the room John and I had at the end of my posting in 1986. The bed faced east, and as we were dressing for a farewell dinner, John photographed me at the mirror tying on his gift of a necklace of colourful wooden clowns by a Melbourne craftsman. Room 275 on the second floor overlooked Changan Boulevard with its millions of cyclists, battered buses and heavy grey-green military trucks.

Near the Jianguo in the late eighties a swarthy member of the Turkish Uighur minority would sidle up, ostensibly

selling bananas, and offer, ‘Change money?’

A few of the dominant Han Chinese began peddling cheap clothes. While the illegal money changers have gone, clothes dealers have multiplied and now thrive in the Silk Market lane which swarms with tourists.

To reach our former home at Qi Jia Yuan diplomatic compound, I have to pass not just the Silk Market but Starbucks, McDonald’s and the BMW showroom. I dodge bulging buses, streams of taxis, the ubiquitous cyclists and unpredictable newly-licensed motorists. Then, standing between the trees where amplifiers used to

be set, I gaze up at our twelfth floor apartment on the right-hand side of the building. And I remember how each morning we were wakened by what John called ‘a shrill female voice urging us to pursue the four modernizations or maintain our disdain of the gang of four.’

Nowadays the voice would be urging Beijingers to learn English for the 2008 Olympics. And it would have to compete with traffic and touts. In the furore of free enterprise running from the Jianguo to the Friendship Store, it’s possible to bargain over any brand of fake watch and impossible to avoid hustlers with pirated disks of the latest films.

The Friendship Store — once the principal place offering Beijing’s limited goods to foreigners — is filled with more merchandise than before and the underemployed assistants are willing to serve. I’m after a plain black kimono for my mother — preferably in cotton.

‘Sorry, only silk. See, Chinese dragons on the back.’

But I can buy the unadorned silk T-shirts I like as winter vests.



*ABC apartment
in the 1980s*



'Sweet pork'

I drift over to another counter. 'For men,' says a girl, shooing me away.

I know, I think to myself. This is where I'd buy something for John.

On my stroll back to the Jianguo I meet a pet poodle. The previous canines I've seen in China were caged for consumption at the Canton market. I once saw a large dog, skinned and slaughtered, hanging from a noose over the butcher's block. On another occasion, when guest of honour in my ancestral county, Taishan, I was served the local delicacy of dog casserole. I screwed up my eyes to avoid the sight of bones but was pleasantly surprised. It tasted like sweet pork.

'What a beautiful white coat you have,' I purr.

The poodle, trimmed meticulously, sniffs me and approves.

In the early eighties Chinese aspired to the four things that go round: a bicycle, a watch, a fan and a sewing machine. By the mid-eighties their goal was the four big things: a cassette recorder, a television, a refrigerator and a washing machine.

Now the emerging middle class have the four luxuries: their own apartment, a car, private education for their children — at home or abroad — and holidays throughout China or overseas. Increasing numbers also parade a pet pooch. Concubines too are back as a status symbol — the more mistresses, the more wealthy. Senior leader Jiang Zemin — known for breaking into *O Sole Mio* in public — is rumoured to favour a glamorous opera star.

Monday, 3 June 2002: I lunch at a Shanghainese restaurant serving eight treasures tea. The attendant, decked out in a

red, black and gold costume, makes an elaborate ceremony of every drop he pours — through the longest, thinnest spout I've ever seen. My guest is a slim stylish Chinese whose smooth demeanour masks the trauma of his past.

'I was twelve at the time,' he reminisces, flashing back to when his father was hauled by Red Guards to parade in a dunce's cap through jeering crowds in a provincial capital. 'That makes you grow up very fast.'

'Were you a Red Guard?'

'I would have been but my father was a "capitalist roader". Not a worker, peasant or soldier.' Then, after a sip of tea, 'We couldn't have met like this when you lived here.'

'Now, so much has changed. Beijing's almost unrecognisable from when I was last here. I haven't been back since leaving for Hong Kong on the Friday, June the 2nd.'

'So you were there at the time. You saw everything. We didn't see anything.'

Beijing censored the massacre: the scenes shown elsewhere were withheld in China.

'I'm not political,' my companion hastens to add.

'I'm not political' is almost a mantra as Beijingers concentrate on their families and making money. They increasingly live normal lives: unlike before, they make their own decisions, find their own jobs, dress as they please and travel where they like. They're free so long as they don't challenge the system.

Tuesday, 4 June 2002: Tiananmen Square, on the anniversary of the massacre. The jubilation and hope turned to tragedy of 1989 has been replaced by sterility. No reminder of the tens of thousands of peaceful students who defied martial law to demonstrate for freedom and democracy, free speech and an end to corruption. No carnival atmosphere of tents under fluttering red banners. No young idealists rushing up at the sight of my notebook.



*Tiananmen Square,
May 1989*

the square, headquarters of protestors and press in 1989, is cordoned off. Few people meander in the heat and anyone brave or foolish enough to hold a banner here — be they democracy advocates, Tibetan monks, Catholic priests or members of Falun Gong — risks prison.

From Tiananmen Square I wander round the corner into Wangfujing Avenue — the shopping Mecca of Beijing. This was where John and I vainly traipsed from one camera store to another to try and have a lens repaired. We'd been away in Fujian Province where the anti-tourist bureaucracy

*Watching
events unfold*



‘Please, write your name on my T-shirt!’

‘Tell our story to the world!’

Vast and virtually empty stretch the flagstones. From three or four tourist buses passengers alight to view the Great Helmsman in the Mao Mausoleum. The Monument to the People’s Heroes in the centre of

got to us. There, after the evening’s obligatory banquet, we found ourselves walking along the footpath arguing senselessly. John lost his temper and threw his camera with its long lens onto the ground. That put a stop to our argument and put the kybosh on both lens and flash. They

had to be repaired in Hong Kong. Afterwards, whenever we came across the gap in our Fujian photos, we laughed.

On this hot Tuesday afternoon Wangfujing overflows with Beijingers in their thousands. Waving revolutionary red flags, they're barracking for China in the World Cup

— televised live from South Korea on a giant screen. China has made it for the first time: China versus Costa Rica. Fans have spilled out of offices, shops and factories to sit, squat or stand in the mall to cheer and agonise over their team.

While I mingle with the Wangfujing crowd, not far away at the Workers' Stadium — which I associate with the mass execution campaign launched soon after my arrival in 1983 — ABC correspondent Eric Campbell and his crew are filming a similar crowd.

The scene is repeated throughout the People's Republic: masses of Chinese are taking time out to watch the soccer on huge screens. An historic match which strengthens the sense of nationalism sweeping the country. China will lose the game but with no loss of face.

I'm like the locals: my purpose isn't political. It's personal — a journey of remembrance and discovery. I'm back to see



The crowd watching China vs Costa Rica, June 2002

China vs Costa Rica, June 2002 (final score: China 0, Costa Rica 2)



some of the changes that have transformed Beijing since John and I lived here, when it was still known as Peking. Then, most Chinese who had to deal with foreigners — usually only senior cadres or servants — found the experience either exotic or distasteful. As John put it: ‘Just as in Australia some people are fond of dogs whereas others can’t bear to have them around.’

When I wrote *Shouting from China*, I was so ‘objective’ — so keen to present a balanced ‘reporter’s view’ — I didn’t mention my private life and that John was living there with me. Some time after he died in September 1993, I read the letters he wrote from Beijing to family and friends. He made me laugh. I’d not seen China with his clarity and wit. His missives also reminded me how, in the rush of adrenalin that drove me in those difficult but exhilarating years, I let my work jeopardise my relationship with John.