

Special Feature

Chinese Whispers from the Sixties

With China so much in the news, my mind wandered back to Peking in 1960, when I lived there. My late husband was taking up his first Foreign Office appointment at the British Mission. After the three day train journey from Hong



Kong, we arrived in time for the October celebration of the anniversary of the revolution of 1949, when communism under Mao Tse Tong first took over from the Nationalists. Unlike many countries, Britain retained a diplomatic presence, the largest of the Western powers to do so.

A World without Birdsong

We lived in a compound, specially built for foreigners, two miles outside Peking, visible in the distance across barren waste land and construction sites (see photograph). China at that time was suffering deep famine; the small flower beds in front of our newly built houses and the roadside verges were planted with cabbages, though they were never harvested but left to rot and smell. All birds had been killed by government order, allegedly for eating the crops. The lack of birdsong was unsettling; soon the crops suffered from insects and the birds were allowed back.

Each household had a cook and an amah selected by the government. The cook had a special permit to visit the foreigners' market to buy our food. At

5pm every evening they had to attend self-criticism sessions. Knowing that they were hungry I would offer them food, which they dared not accept. I tried wrapping it up and putting it in the garbage bin, but even this was rejected. The amah Liliene's husband had been sent to re-

education camp for just such an offence.

The Bare Necessities

We had brought hundreds of tins of food from Hong Kong and necessities such as shirt buttons, thread and toothpaste. But how much toothpaste do you need for two years? I still had stocks five years later. We sent to Finland for butter in the winter, which kept cold on the Trans-Siberian Railway. In the summer we went without. We were not hungry but after a while suffered from vitamin deficiency and were given vitamin injections by the Mission Nurse. An enterprising French correspondent kept chickens in his spare room.

There were few places outside Peking that we were permitted to visit at weekends; the Hunting Park in the Western Hills, the Ming Tombs where we picnicked amongst the ruins, carefully looking under stones for scorpions, and, further afield, the Great Wall snaking its way over the mountains. The winter of 1960 was extremely cold. We were fortunate to be warm in our flats but no public places were heated. When we visited the Peking Opera, almost our only

outside entertainment, we wore fur-lined boots, fur coats, fur hats and thick scarves and gloves and after three hours were almost frozen to our seats. We grew to understand the symbolism and appreciate the high-pitched singing and colourful costumes.

From December the moats around the Forbidden City and the Summer Palace Lake were deeply frozen, providing wonderful skating. In March, when the ice had melted, I shirked the lake walk and sat in the feeble sun at a tea house. The next day my son Thomas was born.

Number One Son Breaks the Ice

The Peking Union Medical College Hospital had been built by the Americans thirty years previously. Now there was little gas or electricity and no drugs. The dimly lit corridors seemed to be used for dying people brought by relatives to the hospital on donkey carts. In the corners were heaps of dirty bandages. The smell was best forgotten, but the doctor was skilful; a nurse stood beside him with a pair of scissors, waiting for a sign to use them. My blond haired, blue-eyed baby was perfect and not likely to be muddled up with the sweet Chinese babies, with their black hair standing on end. I shared a privileged room with a Chinese gynaecologist. The bed had a bed roll, no sheets or blankets and a rock hard pillow. When my next baby was born in England the greatest luxury imaginable was the cup of tea and hot water bottle - and the comfort of speaking the language.

I would push Thomas in his pram around the empty Forbidden City or into the small park near the compound. People would gather and stare and say 'Sulianren' (Russian)? I would smile and say 'Ingworen' (English) and the ice was broken and we were no longer a separate

species, foreigners, barbarians, but mothers, a great unifying bond.

Things We Take for Granted

Bicycles were our only means of getting around. The two mile road into Peking was almost empty, except for dung carts pulled by men roped together. With no shops, food was distributed in each street regularly, so many cabbies (about 12ozs.) of rice and cabbage per household. In the dry weather cabbages were stripped leaf by leaf, threaded on string and hung outside to dry. Stored under a bed they could be reconstituted in hot water. People were very hungry and very slow.

An attractive aspect of Chinese society was the discipline and lack of crime, but this was bought with ruthless suppression of individual freedom. No freedom of speech or of the press, no gaming, even mah-jong. If you had a dog or cat your meagre rations were reduced unless you agreed to have it put down.

Religion was suppressed. We ran Sunday school in our flat and baptised Thomas ourselves; allowed in the Prayer Book in the absence of a priest.

There were no telephones, no post, no ships coming up the Tientsin, no aeroplanes. Our only contact with home and the outside world was via the diplomatic bag, guarded throughout its journey from London by a Queen's Messenger. We began to believe that China *was* the world.

Since those days I have been grateful for so much one tends to take for granted - food, warmth and a roof over my head. I can say what I like (up to a point), mix with my friends, write my experiences in *The Wychwood* and exercise my religion.

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