

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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ARD-9.  
May Day in Peking.

4th June 1965.

Mr. Richard H. Nolte,  
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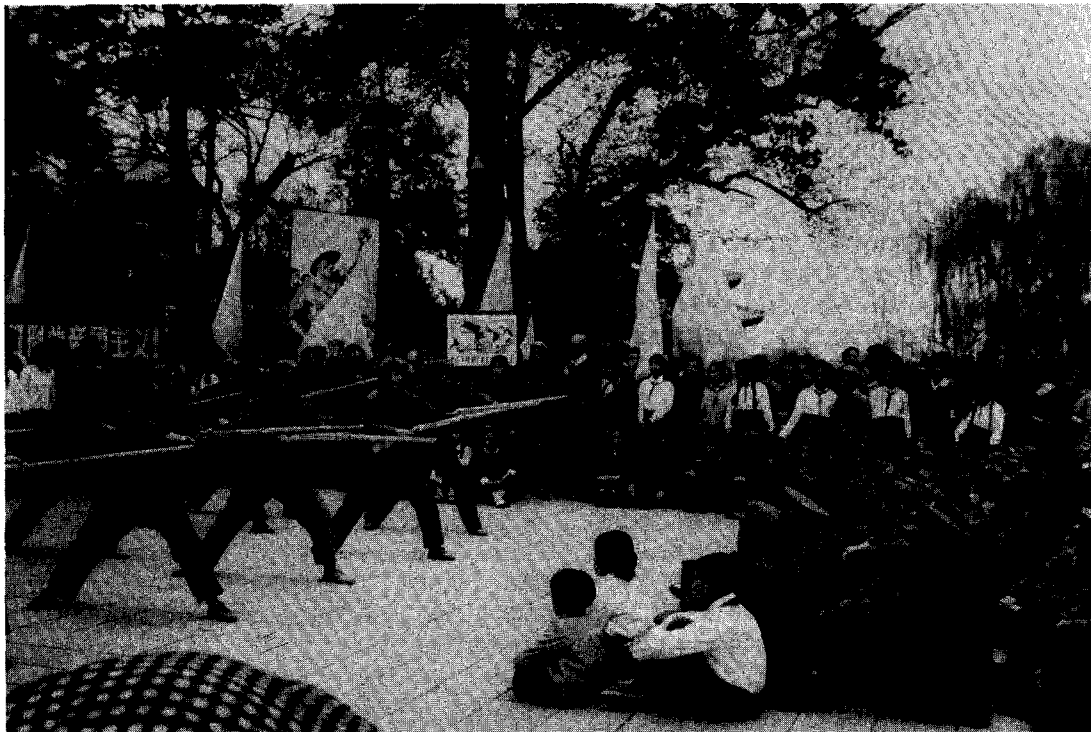
Dear Mr. Nolte,

No foreigner travelling in China during April could fail to grasp the importance of May Day. The aura of expectancy is partly built up by the fact that the festival and where one is to spend it is clearly a good topic of conversation with a foreigner whom one suspects of not quite sharing one's views on Vietnam and who, poor fellow, is probably unable to appreciate what is new on the ideological front. It is such an eminently acceptable form of small talk, in fact, that almost everyone I met in China on my way to Peking asked me whether I would be there for May Day; if so, it would be the high point of my travels in China - I might even get a chance of seeing some of the leaders.

Not that the provincials were to be without their own celebrations. All over the country red banners were appearing painted with slogans of various kinds - "Long live the People's Republic of China! Long live the People's Communes! Long live Chairman Mao! Proletarians of the World, Unite! Raise high the Three Red Banners of Mao Tse Tung's Political Thinking!" Many were, of course, specifically related to Vietnam and solidarity in the face of United States imperialism. In addition to these, as April wore on red flags began to appear on ordinary houses, and one evening in Nanking I even heard a military band practising its May Day repertoire.

As it was I nearly missed the festival altogether, through my own miscalculation of the number of days it would take to make my trip from south to north instead of in the reverse direction as advertised. Had I stuck to my plan I would have repeated an earlier mistake, which led to my spending St. Patrick's Day in a bus between New York and Boston, and spent the great day in the train between Tientsin and Peking. Fortunately, however, the sometimes irksome attentiveness of Lixingshe, the China International Travel Service, served me in good stead, and my mistake was pointed out to me in Shanghai. When I asked my guide there, Mr. Yu, whether anything could be done, he told me that steps had already been taken; it was suggested that I fly direct from Nanking to Peking, leaving out Tientsin altogether; and provisional bookings had been made, for no one would want to miss May Day in Peking.

Arriving at Peking Airport on the 29th April, I saw several delegations being welcomed for the festivities. I was whisked off to the Min-Tsu, or Nationalities, Hotel, the raison d'etre of which is to provide accomodation and suitable food for visitors to Peking from the minority areas, and sure enough it was full of big parties of such people in town for May Day. (Not that that there were no other guests; among the other foreigners at the Min-Tsu were my fellow Fellow of I.C.W.A., Geoffrey Oldham, with Brenda and their four children.) My own floor was chiefly given over to Mongolians, many of them in sheepskins, riding habits and boots; all bore a little red label with the words 'Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region People's Delegation' in Chinese and Mongolian. Other large groups were Tibetans, some very Turkish looking people from Sinkiang, Uighurs, Koreans (many of whom live in China) and Miaos, but there were numerous others whose names were written in characters which I did not know. The costumes of these various groups were themselves a fascinating assortment. Some wore what must have been quite expensive traditional costumes kept for special occasions; others, like the Mongolians, had a costume that was still regarded as a sensible working dress; others had given up traditional dress for modern Chinese cotton suits, or in the case of the women, for Russian-looking woollen skirted suits with ankle socks; and between these was a whole spectrum of



May Day in Pei-Hai Park, Peking: a group of dancing schoolgirls edify an audience of soldiers with a military ballet.

combinations of old and new, giving the groups a very motley, even exotic look.

As in the provinces, streets and buildings were much beflagged, particularly the houses in the narrow residential lanes or "hut'ungs", and large banners with slogans were being put up on public buildings. The place of honour, on either side of the portrait of Chairman Mao on the front of the Tien An Men Gate, was reserved for two mild, almost conservative slogans - "Long live the Chinese People's Republic!" and "Long live the Solidarity of the Peoples of the World!" - but elsewhere there were some more hard-hitting ones. In the great square opposite the Tien An Men Gate four large coloured portraits had been erected to preside over the festivities. On one side were the extraordinarily anachronistic, bearded and cravatted figures of Mark and Engels; on the other side Lenin - always for some reason depicted in China wearing a blue spotted tie rather than the high-collared jacket to which he gave his name and which all China has copied - and Stalin.

A pleasant feature of the May Day celebrations was that it was the occasion for presenting several evenings of classical Peking opera, which is now rather rare, modern opera being in favour. I was taken to such a performance on the night of my arrival by the courtesy of Lixingshe. The next night, however, the 30th April, was set aside for the agency to entertain all the foreign tourists in Peking to a noble Peking Duck feast at a restaurant famous for the dish. At the same time we were all given our invitations to various celebrations the next day - tickets of admission to the Pei-hai Park for the morning, and to the stands in Tien An Men Square for a firework display in the evening.

This was the first inkling I had of the form the much-discussed celebrations were to take. Like most of my fellow tourists I had supposed - and hoped - that there would be a big parade in the square, reviewed by the leaders of the Party and State. It turned out, however, that this was the great feature of October 1st rather than May 1st; the main attraction of May Day was said to be the series of entertainments put on by amateur and professional troupes of all ages in the various parks of the city. When I asked whether that meant there was no parade at all I got a very vague answer; in fact it became clear the next day that there was one, and I saw the remnants towards the end of the morning, but for some reason it was felt that foreign tourists would be better sent to the parks.

Pei-Hai Park - so named after a lake called the "Northern Sea" - is the most famous of the Peking parks, so much so that it even appears in textbooks of Chinese. I went there early in the morning with my very able and companionable guide, Mr. Hu. We were joined for the outing by the service manager of Lixingshe, a Mr. Su, who was also to come with us in the evening.

Quite why I was chosen to have such an illustrious escort I do not know; it may have been because I spoke some Chinese, and Mr. Su spoke no English. On the other hand, he asked me many questions about my interest in Chinese law, and I later found out that his responsibilities included the arrangement of all visits and interviews for Luxingshe's clients.

The streets leading to the park were crowded with holiday-makers - many of them in tight groups walking, as is the custom for such groups when on an outing, behind a red flag. Some, too, were obviously going to take part in shows of one kind or another, for they were already wearing make-up and costume.



Two boys entertain a crowd in Pei-Hai Park with a humorous dialogue about Vietnam. Note the bamboo clappers.

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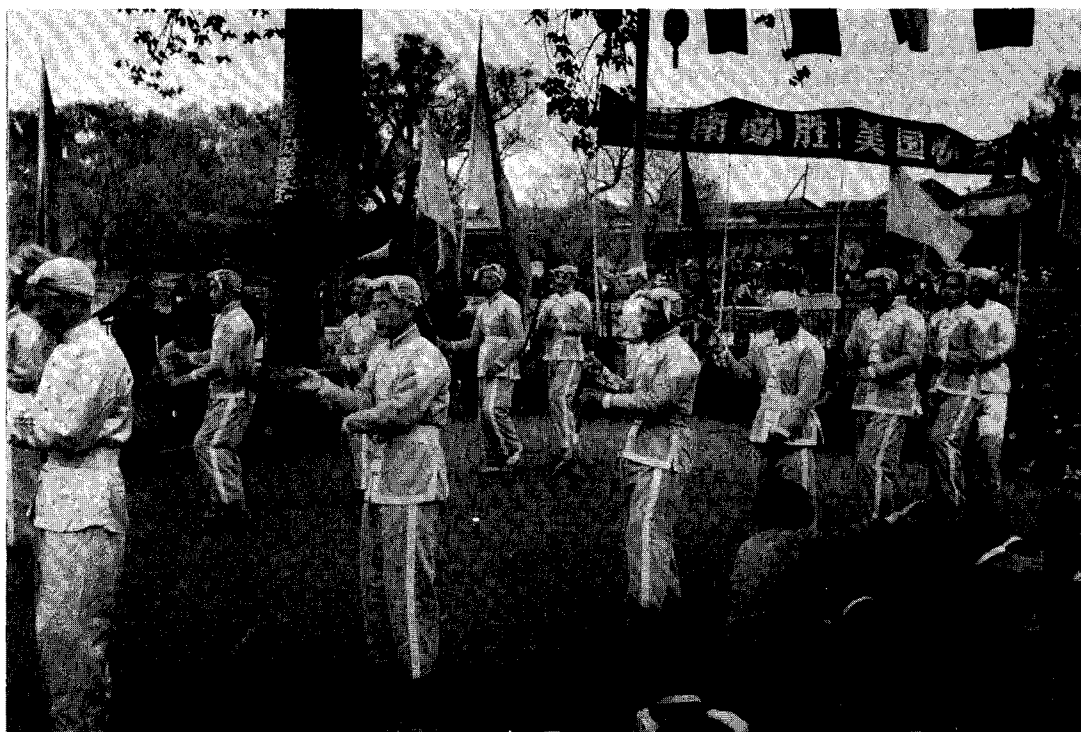
At the park gates stood a number of military policemen and people taking tickets. Mr. Hu told me that entry to the parks was by ticket, the purpose being to ensure that the crowds were evenly distributed throughout the twenty-odd parks in the city, but that anyone could obtain tickets in advance from their factories, unions, street committees or other organizations. I had some doubts about this, partly because I doubt whether there would have been room for the whole population even in twenty parks, some of which are small, but chiefly because of the large numbers of people milling around the streets, the main square, and near the entrances to the parks, all apparently without tickets. However, there was certainly a good cross-section of people of all sorts in the Pei-Hai Park - whole families of three generations, young people in groups, married couples of various ages, grandparents with small children. There were plenty of foreigners, for the diplomatic community and the foreign experts had all been given tickets to Pei-Hai as well as the tourists. Most prominent of all were the soldiers, men and women, of the People's Liberation Army, who were there in force. Almost all of them were dressed in their best uniforms, with collar badges, stiff peaked caps

of khaki cotton, and even stiffer Russian-style epaulettes, on which all ranks managed to have a democratic helping of gold braid. (As it has turned out, with the extinction of ranks in the armed forces on the 24th May such trappings were abolished, so that I saw what was probably the last display of military finery in Peking for some time to come.)

Inside the park there were a number of stages set up for the more elaborate performances - for example an acrobatic display organized by a trade union from a group of talented amateurs, and a modern opera put on by the students of the Peking Opera School. The majority of entertainments, however, were held in little clearings, often with some chairs arranged round them. I stopped by one such clearing, where there appeared in turn a folk-dance by some women soldiers, an army singing group and what can only be described as a Chinese Morris dance, complete with bells on sticks, white costumes and a curious hopping step, which was apparently popular in Hopei. This last was performed by factory workers, though the accompaniment was provided by an obliging army accordionist left over from the previous act.

Most of the shows were put on by students of various ages, and they ranged in quality from primary school dancing groups, often out of step even if they knew what the steps were, to quite polished performances by senior secondary school students. They all appeared to get a great deal of enjoyment out of it all - particularly those who were dressed up. Actors in plays with a modern theme would be walking around in all sorts of makeshift uniforms, carrying stage weapons and even drums, while folk dancers would be wearing the costumes of all sorts of minority nationalities. Above all, there seemed to be a general licence to splash make-up on one's face, and children of all ages, together with some adult performers, were walking about in all shades of pink and red.

Probably at least a third of the children in the park were performing in some role or other. When they were not doing so they walked about with their parents and friends, and it seems probable that to have one member of the family taking part was one of the ways in which tickets for the park could be obtained. But some families seemed to take little interest in the performances - they just rowed round the lake in boats, flying balloons and flags, eating, and maybe listening to the Western-style brass band of the People's Liberation Army playing on a boat in the middle of the lake. One of the nicest sights I saw was that of a quite magnificent bearded patriarch very gently paddling a boat round the lake with his tiny grandson - maybe even great-grandson.



**GAITY.** (Above) A group of workers from a suburban factory performing a Hopei folk dance in Pei-Hai Park. (Below) Primary school children dancing under their teacher's shouted directions. Those wearing red scarves are Young Pioneers.







**SOLIDARITY.** (Above) Marching behind an outsize edition of the Works of Chairman Mao, Chinese workers march to join their Vietnamese comrades in a ballet. Cartoon at left shows President Johnson in Vietnam. (Below) Young Pioneers marching past the Great Hall of the People in Tien An Men Square.



There was a definite political theme behind most of the entertainment offered in Pei-Hai Park - the demonstration of the Chinese people's support for the people of Vietnam and of their firm resolution in the face of American imperialism. This theme could be seen in almost everything, for example in the little sideshows and games designed and managed by small boys. At one stand one could take a miniature fishing-rod and try to hook small downed U.S. planes out of the sea, at another it was possible to throw wooden balls at an effigy of President Johnson, all free of charge. I was invited to bounce a ping-pong ball off a table into a small cylinder - not as easy as it looked. When I had at last succeeded I asked why the outside of the cylinder was painted to resemble masonry, to be told, amid a lot of lighthearted laughter, that I had just bounced a bomb into the U.S. headquarters in Saigon. The designers and operators of this little game were about ten years old.

I stopped by a clearing where some ballets and tableaux with a strongly political flavour were in progress. In one, after a group of girls dressed as Vietnamese peasants had done a spot of skirmishing with wooden rifles, (I was sad to see none of the stage Americans that one begins to expect in the professional opera) groups of Chinese soldiers, peasants and workers came up to demonstrate their solidarity with the Vietnamese, miming their occupations and singing suitable songs. The whole company - they were all girls - were led into a grand finale by a cadre carrying a large copy of the Collected Works of Chairman Mao above her head. This was followed by a ballet danced by a livelier group, which, as I overheard, came from 'le meilleur lycee de Pekin'. Again all the dancers were girls, but their performance represented some phase of the Long March, so that they were all dressed as men. Whether or not for this reason, they seemed unable to take their performance seriously, for although they danced well they kept giggling, despite the serious faces of their largely military audience.

An interesting feature of the acts that I watched relating to Vietnam was that they all seemed to limit the support given to purely peaceful activities - there was no suggestion of military aid. In general the message seems to have been that the best way to support the Vietnamese is through greater productivity and labour - in other words, he who does his job well in China is standing shoulder to shoulder with the Vietnamese people.

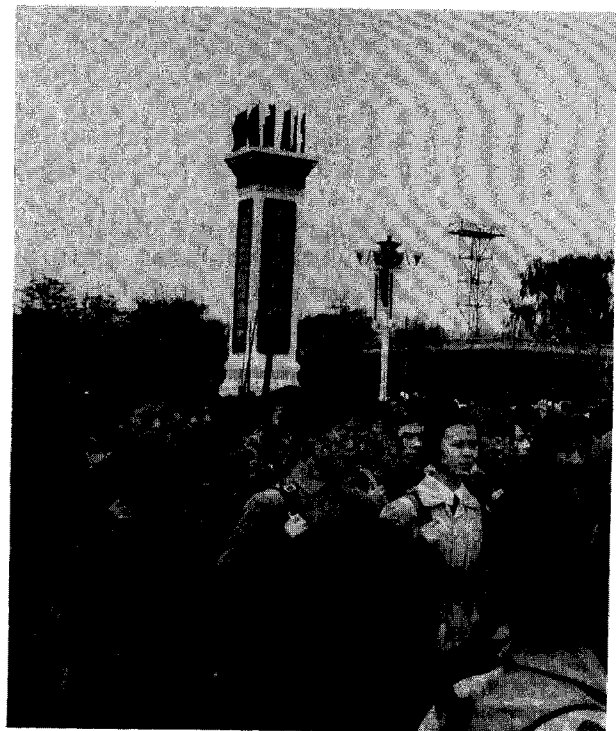
The great majority of performers in all these shows were girls or young women - this also applied to the folk-dancing. Once over the primary school age, men seemed far less involved in all these May Day activities, though there were exceptions. One or two activities were largely the province



of small boys, notably the sideshows already referred to, and there were a number of boys in their teens making good political use of a venerable and popular form of entertainment, dialogue storytelling to the rhythmic accompaniment of bamboo blocks or castanets. The stories are usually funny and are in a sort of verse, and they seemed to go down very well with the crowd. One pair whom I watched for a while, aged about fourteen, were very good comedians, with quite a power of facial expression; one of them was telling the other the story of his experiences as an American boy in Vietnam.

I was struck by the simplicity of the entertainment offered. Quite apart from the monotony of the political content of it all, everything seemed very unsophisticated. To take one example, a lot of people were getting a great deal of pleasure from guessing the answers to a series of riddles and conundrums which had been painted on cloth and tied up on a long string. As with all the sideshows, there were no prizes for getting the right answers, which could be checked against a list. Apart from the political nature of many of the answers, this is a traditional form of entertainment. I wondered whether there was anywhere else left in the world where such things are enjoyed; and also, more specifically, whether the citizens of a more Westernized city like Shanghai would be so easily entertained.

Another noticeable thing was the lack of refreshments on sale to the public. Judging by the standards of Hong Kong, a Chinese festival is an occasion for heavy indulgence in all sorts of special foods - cooked meats, sweets, fruit and pastries of many kinds. It is not that there seems to be a shortage of these things in China, for they are all, except for some imported fruits, on sale freely in other places. I had expected some stalls in the park, but there were none. It seems that there is some kind of deliberate dissociation between eating and public entertainment, for when we were at the opera Mr. Hu remarked, I think with a note of regret, that in the old days all sorts of delicacies were sold



Members of the People's Militia marching in Tien An Men Square.



### Marchers in Tien An Men Square

Ch'en, the Mayor of Peking and a senior member of the Party, as he arrived with his wife and son in a large "Red Flag" limousine to tour the park. Once more, as he got out there was a burst of applause, but it soon died down, and as far as I could see he was not mobbed.

We drove to Tien An Men Square, where the parade was breaking up. It seemed a rather chaotic affair, at any rate by this stage. There were several marching columns, but they were marching in completely different directions. As one column passed, the thick crowd closed in behind, while the police tried to clear a way for the next column, which might be marching at right angles to the first one.

There great numbers of red flags on parade, together with drums and bands, groups of children doing club-drill and calisthenics on the march, detachments of rather young looking militia carrying rifles with fixed bayonets, and several floats and trophies carried on the shoulders, of which the favourites were large garlands of flowers and gigantic replicas of the Collected Works of Chairman Mao. Groups of workers and students marched about shouting slogans in time to the cries of their cheerleaders and carrying posters referring to Vietnam.

After about half an hour of watching these marchers and trying to photograph them through or over a highly mobile crowd, I was taken to another park, the Chung Shan Park, which is part of the Forbidden City. Among the other attractions there I saw an Army entertainment team at work, putting on acrobatics and singing; they were clearly all professionals, down to their compere, a woman officer who

in the theatre. There is probably much to be said for putting an end to widespread eating at the opera as tending to better behaved audiences, but it seemed a pity that no refreshments were on sale in the park on May Day.

As we left Pei-Hai a stir in the crowd and a bout of clapping indicated the arrival of some high leader or official. Outside the gates I was able to get a close view of P'eng

wore make-up with her uniform. It was noticeable that in this park, apart from this troupe, there were very few soldiers.

After a while, the performers in this park also began to fold up their properties, and the final item on the programme began - a dance in which every child in sight joined. It was a simple enough dance, with everyone holding hands in great concentric circles, the boys being on the outside, the girls in the centre, and they all danced with great gusto and apparently without tiring, for I left them at it. By this time the Square was emptying and everyone was going off to eat their midday meals. Mr. Hu and Mr. Su seemed pleased when I claimed to be worn out and fit only to rest in the afternoon, so that they could also head for home. For many people, though, May Day afternoon was a good opportunity to go shopping, for when I went for a long walk down Hsitan Tachieh, a main street near the hotel, at about five o'clock, the shops were all open and doing a roaring trade.

After a May Day dinner with the Oldhams, I met my guides again and went off to see the firework display in Tien An Men Square. This time the foreign guests, together with a number of overseas Chinese, and also some other ticket holders who were presumably high officials or prominent citizens, were assembled in one of two large viewing stands on either side of the Tien An Men Gate itself. Along the top of the gate, among flags and large, red "palace" lanterns were the leaders, but they were not visible from our stand. At our feet, down in the square, an enormous crowd was assembled. I was told that there were at least half a million people in sight. The atmosphere of this vast square, with its floodlit buildings, its flags and its clusters of globular white lights was very impressive - it was the kind of occasion for which, after all, the square was designed.

When one looked more closely, it became plain that in fact the crowd was no disorganized mass, but a series of large groups, each with a great banner bearing the group's name on it, and each organizing some form of entertainment, either music-making or dancing. Right in front of our stand, strategically placed,



A contingent of girls doing hoop exercises as they march in Tien An Men Square.

was a party from the Central Nationalities Institute, who were giving performances of a whole range of different folk dances throughout the evening. Most of the groups came from universities and similar institutions. The scene in the square looked a very merry one from a distance, in contrast to the atmosphere of the stand where we waited in a chilly wind, and I rather wished I was down there. However, I was told by an English friend next day that there was a rigid control of movements in the square, and that had she not been a foreigner she would not have been allowed to move from group to group watching the dancing. I was left with the impression that the merriment was designed chiefly for the eyes of those who looked down from the stands.

After we had been on the stand for about half an hour the fireworks began. It was certainly one of the finest such shows I have ever seen. It consisted essentially of successive bursts of rockets, about fifteen being fired at a time from point in a wide semi-circle round the square. All the rockets were different, with complicated and neatly timed colour combinations. To my slight surprise there were no set-pieces, no great slogans or pictures outlined in fire.

The first part of the display lasted for about half an hour, after which the dancing resumed (in one or two enthusiastic groups it had gone on regardless of the fireworks) until the next round of rockets. The display came to an end at about ten o'clock, after which the people on the stand dispersed. The crowd stayed on for quite a while, but I had already seen and heard enough for one day. Even from my hotel room, though, I could hear the loudspeakers blaring, sometimes music, sometimes the news and commentary which is so much part of Chinese life.

Yours sincerely,

*Anthony R. Duke*

Received in New York June 14, 1965.