

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JYB-4

In China: a time to study

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29 April, 1980

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Dear Peter

December 14, 1979. Passengers on Tarom flight 245 from Bucharest are disembarking in Ben Gurion International Airport. Most of them are young Israelis returning from vacation in Rumania. My wife Brenda and daughter Anna are getting on the airline shuttle bus to go to the terminal. I follow, two or three passengers behind them. I sense being addressed and look to my left. A young woman Sabra in civilian clothes standing on the tarmac by the bus door addresses me in a language that I do not get. Is it Hebrew, Arabic?

"Sorry, I did not get you."

"Passport please," she said in English.

I put down my hand luggage, search for the passport in my coat and jacket pockets, only to remember that the passports are in the briefcase with Brenda on the bus.

"My passport is in my briefcase on the bus." I said to her.

"Ah! You have a friend too. Call your friend and get the passports."

I have always considered Brenda my friend and was happy to hear the Sabra confirming it. I get on the bus, call Brenda from over the heads of half a dozen passengers, get off the bus only to see the door being shut. Suddenly a man jumps to the front of the bus from behind me, and orders the driver to open the door. I look around me, now fully aware of what is going on, to see that I am surrounded by people, some in civilian clothes and others in military uniform, armed with the famous Uzi gun. The door of the bus opens. Brenda appears with a puzzled look on her face, Anna tugging along. Little does the Sabra know that I have two friends with me not one.

I retrieve the passports from the briefcase. The Sabra feasts her eyes on the many Chinese visas stamped

Joseph Y. Battat is currently an Institute Fellow and his area of interest is the People's Republic of China. Up until recently he lived there with his family for two and a half years.

in my passport and orders us to follow her. We go to the left towards a red-haired man standing in front of a yellow US-made van, with an Uzi strapped on his shoulder. He is busy examining the passports of two young Arab-looking (or shall we say Semitic-looking) men. After a brief exchange he lets them go. Then comes our turn. He glances through our papers, and invites us to get into the van. The doors shut from the outside. He asks Brenda to sit on a bench beside him, and me on a chair across a small table from him. The interrogation begins with the Uzi laid on the table, its muzzle pointing straight at my heart.

Welcome back to the REAL world!

January 1980. Although I have not written a cheque for two and a half years I remember that using personal cheques is more practical than using cash all the time. So I present myself to a Baybank branch in the Boston area and inform the teller that I want to open an account. -"You have to see the manager," she says. -"How much money do you want to put in your account?" asks the manager. Having heard my answer he then fires his machine-gun with unexpected ammunition: \$500.00 minimum balance, NOW account, family account, personalized cheques, your needs, choice, service charges, extended credit, and 5% interest. -"Now which account do you want to open?" he shoots at me, without giving me time to blink. I feel drunk with all his words whirling in my head, and try to choreograph them into something meaningful.

Welcome back to the REAL world!

Not that we have been living in an unreal world but in a different one.

A world, as seen through our eyes, where: wherever we go there is a large thermos bottle full of hot water and a cup of Chinese tea waiting to be enjoyed. A world where we have a chauffeured black limousine at our disposal but it takes fifty minutes to cover 9.6 miles to go to work daily. A world where we are the center of attraction often surrounded by more than a hundred pairs of inquisitive eyes, yet feeling at times desperately isolated. A world where we are not free to travel beyond a certain perimeter without permission from the authorities, yet when we do all sorts of doors open to us and we enjoy first-class treatment. A world where lunch at work is more like a banquet prepared by a special chef, yet we long for a bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich. A world where the chief surgeon in a

hospital delays his supper to operate on me until late in the evening, then gives me his meal when he finds out that the canteen is closed, and goes back home where he will have very little to eat until the next morning. A world where Chinese is spoken. A world so different from ours that we ended up not learning about it so much as learning about ourselves and our own society.

Yes, Peter, I was in China and lived there for two and a half years!

"May I see your radio?" asked the Chinese Customs officer, after glancing at the customs form I had just filled. I had to declare the foreign exchange, cameras, watch, and electric and electronic equipment I was carrying with me into China. I obliged and handed him my Sanyo Model RP8700 short-wave radio which turned out to be my major source of news from the West for the duration of my stay in China. He examined it turned it around and around, fingered the dozen or so knobs, attempted to pry it open, and finally looking defeated said:

"Cassette?"

"No, radio" I replied

"Cassette!" he insisted and went back to fingering the radio searching for the nonexistent cassette recorder.

My explanation of this incident is that I was at the end of a line of fourteen Canadian exchange students clearing customs, almost all of whom had acquired a radio-cassette recorder in Hong Kong before entering China. Only two of us got ourselves short-wave radios. The customs officer, having examined a stream of radio-cassette recorders expected the same from me. In his famous and widely read paper (in China) "On Contradiction," Mao Tse-tung presented the concept of the universality and particularity of contradiction and, if we extrapolate a little, of every question subject to study. But my customs officer rather failed in considering the particularity of my taste. However, "seeking truth from facts," he finally passed it as a radio.

The first year in China, from August 1977 to September 1978, saw me as a Canadian student on a fellowship from the Canada -China Student Exchange Program established in 1973 following Pierre Trudeau's visit to the "Middle Kingdom". A number of similar programs have been established since the early 1970's between China and Japan, Australia, New

Zealand, and Western European and Third World countries. A student and researcher exchange program was established and implemented with the U.S. in 1979 after "normalization" of relations between the two countries.

All students arriving in Beijing(Peking) must go to the Beijing Language Institute (BLI) to study Chinese for six months to a year, depending on their prior knowledge of the language and the progress they make in their studies. Those with adequate Chinese language ability acquired prior to going to China stay for a few weeks at BLI brushing up on the language while waiting to be assigned to a university to take courses in a subject of their choice. The Chinese Ministry of Education reserves the right to choose the university and at times the subject of study too when not enough space is available to satisfy the foreign student's first choice.

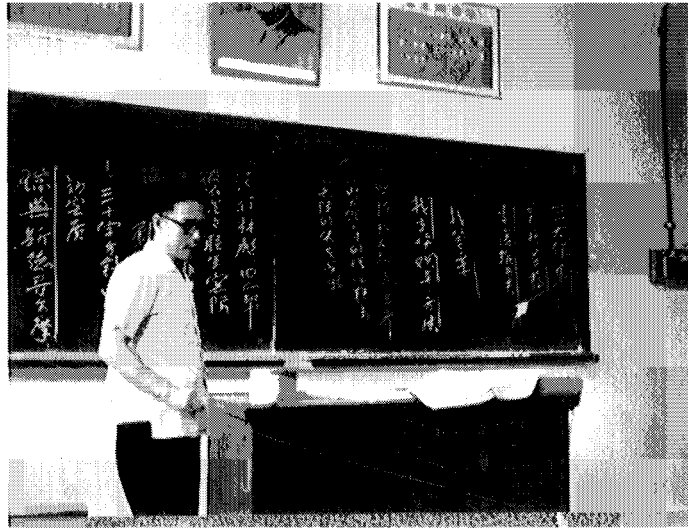
In 1977 one-year courses in the following subjects were offered for students from the Western World: Language, Literature, History, Political Philosophy and Medicine. The universities which were accepting western students at the time included Beijing University, Fudan University in Shanghai, Nanjing University in Nanjing and Liaoning University in Shenyang. The academic level and the range of coverage of the courses were not adequate and often below the expectation of the students who were required in most cases to have already graduated from university. For instance, the only "source materials" used in a semester course of Contemporary Chinese History at Beijing University were the Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung. In a one-year Political Philosophy course given at the same university only original works by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao were used. Despite the students' repeated requests, the teaching staff refused to make available original works of philosophers or political scientists, the critique of whom made by the four mentioned above we were studying, or essays analysing the four's writings.

The Third World countries students participated in totally different education programs from that of their Western counterparts. They came for technical and professional degree training in fields such as Medicine (Western and Chinese), Agronomy, Civil Engineering and Textile Engineering. The first year in China is dedicated to the study of the Chinese language and to the attempt to overcoming the cultural shock they are hit with upon their arrival, often compounded by a total lack of preparation about Chinese society, culture, customs and standard of living. Then they undertake their professional training

for a period of four to five years in various universities across China, up one year on average from before 1978.

After a two-month stay at the BLI to raise my Chinese language level, interrupted by a surgical operation and one week's hospitalization, I went in November 1977 to Beijing University to study Political Philosophy. As alluded to before, the one-year course which ended in July 1978 covered briefly the socialist philosophical tenets held in Marxism, Leninism, Mao Tse-tung Thought as understood by the Chinese at the time and taught to foreign students. The works we studied and analyzed are considered classics in the field. They included the Communist Manifesto by Marx and Engels, Critique of the Gotha Program by Marx, Lenin's State and Revolution, Materialism and Empirio-Criticism, Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism, Engels' Anti-Duhring, and Mao's "On Practice," "On Contradiction," "On the Ten Major Relationships," and "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People" from his Selected Works.

Beijing University set up a special class of Philosophy for Western students. No Chinese students were included. Canada, West Germany, Holland, France, the United Kingdom, Japan and Italy had representation in the class. Lecturers, usually a different one per work studied, covered their materials in two or three three hourly sessions each week. They made the point of using numerous examples, often taken from the Modern and Contemporary periods of Chinese History, to illustrate and elaborate on their teaching. This made the lectures livelier, more interesting, educational and at times controversial. 1977 was a year when a nation-wide ferocious anti-Gang of Four campaign was being waged. This of course was reflected in the course, especially in the illustrations selected by our lecturers. The Gang was labelled, or given a "hat" - ironically, an accusation often thrown at the Gang itself - with all sorts of unflattering philosophical attributes, e.g. metaphysical, non-dialectical and idealist. Some lecturers were carried away to the point of crediting the Gang with the excesses that took place in the Rightist Campaign in 1957 and during the Great Leap Forward. At that time Jiang Qing, Mao's wife, played an insignificant role, if at all, on the Chinese political scene. Zhang Chun-qiao and Yao Wen-yuan were middle-level cadres in Shanghai undoubtedly with very little power to influence local policies let alone national ones. And Wang Hong-wen was a worker or at most a low level cadre in a textile factory in Shanghai.



"Mao Tse-tung On Combining Theory With Practice"
 One of many topics studied in the foreign students
 Philosophy class at Beijing University - July 1978

The most enjoyable part of our study was the weekly or bi-monthly three hours discussions we used to have with our lecturers covering parts of the materials we were studying at the time. The discussions were, to say the least, lively. The students usually prepared well either individually or in small groups prior to the session. The discussions contributed to our understanding of the materials and, more so, of the Chinese understanding and interpretation of it. A repeated point of contention between the students as a whole and the lecturers was the historical and political interpretation and assessment of Stalin's policies in the 1930s and 1940s. The lecturers argued the case that Stalin's major mistakes were to be found in his internal policies and stemmed from the fact that he did not recognize the existence of class struggle and contradictions among the people during the socialist stage of a country's historical development. Thus, instead of using non-antagonistic methods to solve internal problems and differences caused by varied perceptions and legitimate interest, Stalin resorted to the use of force as he considered all contradictions to be antagonistic caused by foreign or internal enemies to Socialism. But he is to be praised for building the Soviet Union's economy and

military power, and for his foreign policy line which checked and defeated Fascism, opposed Imperialism and strengthened International Socialism. Mao Tse-tung gave an assessment of Stalin's policies saying they were 30% bad and 70% good.

The foreign students, particularly the British, begged to differ with Mao's conclusion. The counter-argument went as follows: the suffering and deaths in Stalin's Soviet Union can't be sterilely dismissed merely with albeit important philosophical argument. The German-Soviet Pact was signed in 1939 followed by the German invasion of the Soviet Union, catching it militarily ill-prepared and causing the loss of twenty million lives. The sharing of Poland with Germany and the Soviet-Finnish war in 1939 were not exactly anti-imperialist. Finally and most interestingly, the foreign students argued that had the Chinese Communist Party not resisted the repeated directives and interferences in its own affairs from the Comintern, the People Republic of China may not have existed today!

Despite repeated opportunities to exchange facts and views on the subject, both sides kept their original positions at the end of the academic year.

In 1977 the whole Chinese education system was undergoing major changes, discarding many of the novelties introduced during or following the Cultural Revolution and reestablishing some of the features present in the first part of the 1960s. The selection of students from the ranks of workers, peasants and soldiers gave place to that of using the examination system. The open door schooling quietly died away. The first and major task for the students is to study not make revolution. Top leadership in universities across the nation was being replaced. Universities were being reorganized. So although it was an exciting time for a foreign student to be in a Chinese university, it was not a propitious one to do any serious scholarly research work. Administrative and teaching staff did not know how to handle requests from the foreign students and were waiting for clearer directives from the Ministry of Education. Access to faculty and library facilities were limited. I asked to meet with members of the Economics Department and was turned down. One administrative member of the Foreign Student Office at the university refused even to tell me where the Economics Department building was. At the time post-Mao economic policies were on the drawing board with major modifications and departures from the recent past being introduced. Consequently, Economics departments

in universities were undergoing major readjustment and understandably kept out of bounds from curious foreign students. I am happy to note that beginning Fall 1978 when things began to settle down on the education front, the academic level of teaching and the opportunity for foreign students to do some scholarly research were enhanced. A case in point, although rather exceptional, is that two people in Nanjing University were unofficially working on their doctoral thesis with some teaching staff acting as their advisors cum research assistants.

My extra-curricula activities were varied and straddled over two worlds in Beijing, that of foreign students and of "Foreign Experts." Educational institutions organized visits, trips and cultural activities for their foreign students. When at BLI and Beijing University, I too enjoyed these activities though for the 1977-78 academic year their scope and frequency were reduced due to the ongoing reorganization in the Chinese education field. When at BLI the Canadian students visited Shijiazhuang, a city 250 kilometers southwest of Beijing, where Dr Norman Bethune's Memorial is located. (Dr Bethune is a Canadian surgeon who went to China in 1938 to join the Communists and help them in their guerilla warfare. He died on the war front in 1939 while on duty as a military surgeon.) A foreign student is allowed to travel around China twice a year for a period of three weeks each, the hosting university subsidizing one trip. In addition, I took part in student organized outings such as a 90 kilometers bicycle ride to the Ming Tombs on the outskirts of Beijing and climbing the famous Mount Tai in Shandong Province. Beijing University organized visits to factories, museums and other places of interest. Also, it arranged for the foreign students in the Philosophy class to spend six days of work and discussions in a woolen blanket factory in the northern suburbs of Beijing.

Brenda was the bread winner in the family as a "Foreign Expert" teaching English as a second language at the School attached to the No.1 Beijing Foreign Languages Institute. As her dependent I enjoyed a number of privileges: living in an apartment with hot running water, a bathtub and a shower; access to a canteen where Chinese and international meals are served daily; cheap local transportation and a number of other amenities. Apart from weekly visits to local organizations, cultural performances and trips organized by the Foreign Experts Bureau, we had a series of conferences where distinguished men and women spoke on subjects of politics, philosophy, theater and cinema, education,

health care, literature and economics. But my most valuable experience in the world of foreign experts in Beijing was undoubtedly the personal relationships Brenda and I developed with the majority of her Chinese colleagues, a group of twenty five teachers of English. These relationships grew up to be warm and relaxed, including numerous visits to our respective homes, cooking, wedding and dancing parties, outings and long discussions. Also in 1978, I participated in U.S.-China trade activities, representing a U.S. firm in Beijing. This sideline occupation ended with our subsequent move to Shanghai.

To my mind the most interesting part of being in China at that time was not the study of the Chinese language or Political Philosophy, nor the pursuit of any scholarly endeavour. It was the human experience of living in, and observing a fascinating country undergoing major changes, in the process of assessing its own history of the last thirty years, trying to heal the wounds and repair the damages it had suffered in the last decade, building up all the enthusiasm it needs to face the enormous tasks of bringing itself out of feudalism and into a modern socialist state. That was, and still is for that matter, a country at a crossroad, where decisions were being made and directions being set which will determine the fate of a quarter of humanity. The complexity of the situation in China and the magnitude of the tasks it is facing and willing to shoulder leave nothing short of a deep feeling of awe, and are not easy to describe without giving way to the dryness and impersonality of statistics about the needs and aspirations of one billion people. So I shall limit myself to relating a personal experience as an illustration.

Foreign students at Beijing University live in separate dormitories, one for the boys and the other for the girls. Only two years before my arrival at the university were Chinese students, selected by the administration, allowed to room with their foreign counterparts at the request of the latter. My room was nine feet by eleven, whitewashed with a concrete floor. It was furnished spartanly but functionally: two twin beds, two small tables cum desks and chairs, two book-cases and one clothes cupboard. Light entered through the only window facing the West. A small radiator placed under the window heated the room in the winter. The same size room in the Chinese students dormitories lodged six people. It contained three pairs of bunkbeds, one table and chair, one book-case or perhaps two, and one clothes cupboard. So by Chinese standards foreign students were treated royally albeit not as comfortably as they may have been back home.

One morning in mid-November 1977 a commotion in the hall distracted me from my reading. Then came a knock at the door. I opened it and let in Teacher Liu, one of the two teachers responsible for the foreign students in the philosophy course. He announced that my roommate is about to move in, which he did five seconds later with the help of half a dozen of his friends, mainly female. I was of course the object of curiosity for all of them who were wondering what kind of a strange being their poor friend Li Ling-suo would have to live with now.

Xiao Li, meaning "Young Li" or "Little Li," was a young man of 25 years old at the time, rather tall for a Chinese with a slim body. He comes from a county neighboring the ancient city of Xian in the northwestern part of China. Both his parents worked as shopkeepers in the county seat. So in a way, although they were of peasant lineage, they were not peasants by occupation nor were they workers. He lost his father to illness when he was fourteen years old, his mother and uncle supporting him through school. When he was of high-school age the Cultural Revolution erupted and like millions of his generation he answered the call from Chairman Mao to make revolution. Not only did he make revolution in his county but also carried the revolution into many parts of China and at the same time learning from the peasants. This was a unique opportunity offered to millions of young people to travel free around their country and learn about it. Some of these people I talked to told me that their travels left a deep impression upon them and opened up new vista in their understanding of China, its problems and its people's aspirations. But because of the chaos it generated this practice was stopped in mid-Cultural Revolution.

Xiao Li "graduated" from high-school in 1969, an euphemism for he would have graduated with the normal schooling level had the Cultural Revolution not virtually put a stop to the Chinese education system for a period of four years starting in 1969. He then joined the People's Liberation Army for three years and then returned to his home town to work in the Office of the county's Revolutionary Committee. He was then involved in various administrative tasks such as investigating allegations raised against local cadres and doing organizational work in an afforestation project which three years later earned a front page coverage in the People's Daily. During that time he became a member of the Communist Party.

His work unit, in this case the county's Revolutionary Committee, selected him to go to university to further his



Xiao Li and I in Xiao Li's
corner of our room

formal education. He entered Beijing University in 1975 for a three and a half years study of Philosophy. The bulk of the curriculum was Marxist philosophy, but it included an introduction to Western and Chinese Classical philosophies, and a short critique of Modern and Contemporary Western philosophies.

As Xiao Li had worked for over five years (counting his three years in the army) before going to university, he was entitled to his full salary, of 55 yuan (around US\$36) a month, paid by his work unit. His salary was a good one for a 25 years old man in China and he was quite well off as a student. In 1977-78, typically a student who didn't receive a salary from his ex-work unit got a 19.50 yuan monthly stipend from the university, 15.50 of which covered the cost of three daily meals at the canteen. The rest, about US\$2.60, was to buy books, stationery and for pocket money. Often the family had to subsidize the student. Only when the family per capita monthly income fell short of a minimum amount, around 35 yuan, did the State make an additional contribution in the vicinity of 15 yuan to support the student. To cover similar expenses, Canadian students received 120 yuan from the Chinese government and a subsidy of Can\$100 a month, a total of 260 yuan. Tuition, room and teaching materials were provided free for both Chinese and foreign students.



北京海淀红艺

Anna, Xiao Li and I in a Tibetan
attire at the Ming Tombs
Spring 1978

Every weekday, Xiao Li and I made the point of finding about one hour a day to discuss all sorts of topics such as politics on the national and international scenes, China's social and economic questions, life in China, North-America, Western Europe and the Middle East, our backgrounds and our studies. He was game to discuss anything. When the subject was China or Marxism, he displayed a good knowledge of facts often citing dates and references. When the subject was the Western World or a question he was not familiar with the tone would be inquiring with a sincere desire to hear the version and interpretation

of a foreigner. In the beginning we seemed to talk a different language - literally too, as being from Shanxi Province, he had an accent most difficult to understand - but later we found a common ground on which to communicate our ideas and opinions.

In his opinion, the Cultural Revolution's basic objectives and policies were correct, but because of Lin Biao's, the Gang of Four's and other leaders' abuse of power and Mao Tse-tung's trust, it turned out to be a disaster for China's economy, culture and society. To cover up their mistakes caused by their ultraleftist policies the Gang of Four professed an ultraleftist socialism which stressed economic equalitarianism among other things. Thus China was caught in a vicious circle. The upshot was that China's economy suffered and so did the standard of living of the Chinese. He often used to say: "If socialism does

not improve the life of the people, including their material life, then we do not want this socialism!"

He claimed that there are two essential factors at play in repairing the enormous damage caused by the Cultural Revolution and in putting China on a normal development course. The first is leadership: at the top and at all levels, there is the need for a dedicated group of capable people who have at heart the welfare of the Chinese people at large and who are able to work and cooperate together peacefully in making and implementing policies. The second is to put the stress on economic development in order to afford social reforms. For that a peaceful situation must prevail in industry and rational management practised accompanied by technological development aided by the transfer of technology from abroad. I used to point out to him in various ways the interactions existing between the development and use of technology, and social factors, often using examples from the experiences of the West and the Third World. Whereas in the beginning he used to dismiss them saying that China is different in its culture and political system, he recognized later on the potentiality of problems, thus benefitting us of interesting and rewarding discussions on China's present developmental policies and their possible outcome.

Xiao Li's appetite to learn about the West was matched only by my appetite to learn about China. He wanted to know about our daily life, our education, legal and political systems, our standard of living and purchasing power, the problem of poverty and welfare system - he was quite impressed with the Canadian Health Care System - consumerism, the press, and dozens of other topics. Before becoming my roommate for nine months, Xiao Li's relationship with foreigners was nonexistent until he went to Beijing University and minimal even then as he was living in a Chinese student dormitory. His knowledge of foreign countries came almost exclusively from Chinese sources: books (fairly rare), newspapers (extremely poor and dogmatic coverage until 1978), and the Reference News (a daily selection of news carried in major papers around the world and translated in Chinese). I doubt very much that he had regular access to a short-wave radio to listen to foreign broadcasts. (When together we used to pool and compare the daily news from all the sources available to both of us.) By asking him to share a room with a "Big Nose", the university administration had given him a rather unique opportunity to be in touch with an outside source of information.

Unlike some of his classmates who were roommates of foreign students, he took advantage of the situation to learn as much as possible and satisfy his intellectual curiosity. What he thought of the strange habits and idiosyncracies of a "Foreign Devil" and of the many signs of his society's affluence, he never let me know. He was very courteous, hospitable and helpful to me in more ways than one. We were sorry to part in late July 1978, after his graduation. He has been assigned not to go back to his native county but to help reestablish and teach in a Party school in a neighbouring county. (The system of Party schools was reinstated in 1977). Saying goodbye was an extremely emotional moment for both of us, realizing the rather valuable and unique experience we had shared. Fortunately, we met again for three days in Xian in July 1979 and now keep in touch through our correspondence.

Xiao Li is a "worker-peasant-soldier" student. He is a very intelligent young man, well read, eloquent with a clear mind and a good sense of humour. He was considered one of the best students in his class and many a time his classmates would come to him for help. When one thinks about it, had it not been for the Cultural Revolution's new education policies, had he been selected mainly on scholarly merit upon his graduation from high-school, Xiao Li would have probably never entered university. Or if he did, undoubtedly not the prestigious Beijing University, but a second or third rate one. Nowhere, not even in China, are things just black or white. The Cultural Revolution is not an exception.

Sincerely yours



Joseph Y. Battat