

This isn't your Father's Communism

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by Monica Haven

I grew up during an era of Russian-style Communism. Having lived in Austria, which bordered upon several East Block countries, we often peeked behind the curtain to see uniformly drab architecture in perpetual disrepair, encircled by barbed razor wire and overshadowed by grotesquely gargantuan statues of Lenin and Marx. The hammer and sickle were prevalent, as were soldiers and guns. Fear was ubiquitous and palpable; conversations were muted and censored.

Not so in Beijing which was literally bursting with frenetic activity and color. Mao's uniform, homogeneously dark blue and dependably shapeless, is but a distant memory. The new China is best characterized by its umbrellas: Men and women alike seek shelter from sun and rain beneath a vast variety of brilliantly-hued silk parasols that glisten seductively and provide a kaleidoscope of color in the foreground of every photograph.

While a sedate photo of Mao does grace the entrance to the Forbidden City and the hammer and sickle do mark the Parliament Building behind Mao's Tomb, few other Communist trappings are obvious. Stationed at bases scattered throughout the city, the military remains almost invisible, as do even the police which have been relegated to traffic control. Pedestrians hustle purposefully, navigating with grace amidst millions of brightly colored Hondas, VW's, Buicks, Nissans, Fords, Saabs, Citroens, and Audis battling billions of decrepit black bicycles for the right-of-way.

There is none! I quickly adapted to the Beijing traffic scene by ignoring all posted signs, signals, and road markings. The trick was to simply maintain pace and dive headlong into the melee, oblivious to any potential hazard. I survived close encounters with equally determined transportation mavens by displaying an apparent sense of dauntless courage.

Indeed, the Chinese of today are fearless—unafraid of even their own government and willing to talk openly about world events, business, and local politics(!). This was not what I expected. Actually, things were so "normal" that I completely forgot that I was in Red China until...

..Wei ominously warned me to "be careful. There are spies everywhere. They monitor the internet. You can be arrested." With sudden foreboding, I realized that I had peeked not only behind the iron curtain, but had slipped furtively over The Wall.

For centuries China has been encircled by its great wall. Whether built to protect the nation from its warring neighbors or entrap its own citizenry, the 4000-mile barrier effectively isolated the population. And although most of the masonry had deteriorated long ago, this sleeping giant only began to awaken in recent years.

China's accession to the World Trade Organization has been accompanied by innumerable demands that subtly and overtly require the opening of economic and

political borders. For the most part, the Chinese have yielded and in only four short years have embraced an explosive free market economy which beckons seductively. Like eager children fresh after an afternoon nap, they race energetically toward the future with hardly a look back; they totter over occasional obstacles but impatiently and doggedly stagger ahead, confident that a maternal hug waits.

I was witness to this change as I crisscrossed Beijing. I ventured forth inquisitively to observe a day in the life of local residents, capturing my revelations on film and paper. Language barriers notwithstanding, I conversed, discussed, and philosophized with fellow commuters on busses and in subways, at street corners and in shops, to make sense of the sights and sounds with which I was bombarded.

I made every effort to remain objective and not allow my capitalist predilections to color my opinions. I asked a myriad of questions and was guided toward yet more inquiries by the answers freely given to me. I didn't mince words or censor my curiosity; nor did my subjects. And so I was doubly taken aback by Wei's forewarning to "be careful of Communist spies." Surely, this wasn't *that* kind of Communism?!

Then I remembered that Wei was from Taiwan—the "other" China, the true China. Proud of its independence and democratic regime, the Taiwanese are staunchly opposed to, prejudiced against, and fearful of their mainland compatriots. Hence the warning!

As a virgin tourist in China, unacquainted with the political strife, I took momentary heed of Wei's admonition. What if he was right? After all, I was a guest in a country renowned for its civil rights violations and I was a long way from home. And so while I continued my tireless exploration and interminable inquisitions, I also refrained from writing home about my discoveries and interpretations. (Just in case.)