

### 3 – THE GREAT WALL AND THE MING TOMBS

As we had all slept well after our long day yesterday, everyone was in good form for our trip to see the Great Wall of China this morning. However, a lady from Cork had other plans; during breakfast she announced, 'Ah, I don't think I'll go the Great Wall today – I think I'll stay here and do a little bit of ironing instead.' Our guides advised us to bring warm clothing and wear shoes, for it might be cool on the Wall, as it often is. In fact, it was sunny and warm when we left, and we were told that it was a perfect day for the visit, for it was often misty up in the mountains. Our guides informed us that we would be travelling for about two hours in the coach, as our destination was about forty miles north-west of Beijing.

Once out of the city, we drove quickly and, like yesterday, frequent use was made of the horn. We passed through some interesting countryside, where we saw people working in the fields. At times we got glimpses of old China, for here and there we saw men and young women carrying heavy loads hanging from poles across their shoulders, and we noticed that they were using quite primitive-looking farm implements. Some of the villages looked very run down. It was evident that all the land was being put to use and that none was being wasted.

Like yesterday, we saw plenty of bicycles; we also noticed people standing in buses, the backs of lorries, and in carts pulled by tractors. Only a few of them took any notice of us. The younger people, however, were more inclined to smile and wave; little children waved after their parents had encouraged them to do so.

On our journey we passed many wheat, maize and paddy fields, and also factories with red banners and white characters. As many of the banners had the characters for 5 and 1 painted on them, I asked what the significance of these numbers was. I was informed that they stood for the first of the fifth month: May Day, which had recently been celebrated.

After about an hour, high mountains suddenly appeared on the horizon. This was the Jundun range, our destination. As we neared them, the scenery became quite picturesque, especially when we began to climb steep roads and whizz around hairpin bends. Now and then we passed dusty villages perched here and there in the folds of the mountains. I would have loved to have photographed the scenery, but as we were travelling too quickly and as the road was bumpy, I was unable to do so.

After winding around the mountains for some time and crossing a branch of the Trans-Siberian Railway, we finally caught sight of the famous 2,484-mile-long Wall winding its way up and down the mountains. Here and there it had disintegrated completely.



*The Great Wall of China*

Shortly afterwards we arrived at a long stretch of the wall that had been restored to its former glory, mostly for the benefit of tourists like ourselves. We stopped in a large car park surrounded by various buildings. The place was full of people, mostly blue-clad Chinese sightseers. The sun beat down on us and the surrounding countryside, and the sky was blue and cloudless.

Before climbing steps that led up to the wall, Mrs Sun gave us some information about what we were about to see. She began by telling us that the wall was originally conceived by the Qin dynasty emperor Shi Huang Di in about 200 B.C., when he decided to join up various walls in order to keep out the barbarians from the north. At that time it was built of rammed earth, but successive emperors rebuilt it using stone. What we were about to see was the rebuilding done by the Ming dynasty emperors before the Manchus came down from the north – despite the presence of the Wall – and founded the Qing dynasty in 1644. Throughout its long history, all the Wall had managed to do was delay the northerners' invasions rather than stop them.

Unsurprisingly, Mrs Sun then went on to describe the suffering of the working-class people who had been made rebuild and repair the Wall. She informed us that in 607 A.D., when the Wall was being rebuilt, over half of the million labourers conscripted for the work died because of bad treatment and poor working conditions.

The historical background and propaganda over, we were led up to the massive structure, which was nearly wide enough to let two chariots pass each other. We joined thousands of Chinese civilians on the Wall, along with

many People's Liberation Army personnel; all of them were taking photographs of each other and laughing. We decided to head eastwards; the farthest part that we would be able to reach was on top of a hill. As I was determined to get there first, I pushed on. However, it was very hard going in places, for I had to go up steep slopes without the aid of steps. As I went, I kept stopping to take photographs here and there. About thirty minutes later, Mrs Jones (from England), Tom, Christopher and I reached a turret at about the same time. Ahead we could see an 'out of bounds' notice, printed in Chinese, Russian and English. We then went up a staircase to the top of the turret and looked across to Inner Mongolia – a tantalizing sight. The perspiration now poured down our faces after our exertion and the heat. It was beautiful here; I could have stayed put all day, admiring the scenery and mixing with the Chinese people. However, we had been given just an hour on the Wall, and so it was time to descend. Going downhill was equally tricky, for we had to stop ourselves gathering too much momentum and crashing into people when walking down the steep slopes.



*On the Great Wall of China*

As I arrived in the car park before the others, I rested in the shade until they came. When Christopher showed up, he asked me if I would like a bottle of orangeade, which was being sold nearby. However, I had to excuse myself and hurry towards the gents' toilets. This was indicated by the word 'Gentlemen' written on a sign under the Chinese characters. I entered the evil-smelling place, and found loos of the ancient Chinese variety: slits in the ground and a couple of footrests. There was no paper, and I had none with me. My Chinese came to the rescue and I asked a lad, who had left the door of his loo open, if he had any. He tore off one sheet and handed it to me. When I squatted down, I discovered that I had diarrhoea and consequently not enough paper. Spotting a young soldier, I asked him, '*Tóngzhì, nǐ yǒu jǐ*

*zhāng zhǐ ma?* ('Comrade, do you have a few sheets of paper?'). The soldier asked a pal who, much to my relief, handed me a length of proper toilet paper. I thanked him, did my business, and got out of the dreadful place as quickly as possible.

Christopher did not know what had happened to me; when I joined him outside, he was wandering around with two bottles of orangeade. I gulped down mine and returned to the coach. Shortly afterwards we heard an interesting anecdote about the orangeade. One of the lads in our party had bought a bottle at the stall. When he had finished drinking the orangeade, he realized that he did not have enough time to join the long queue that had formed, hand back the bottle, and receive a few coins in return. Anxious to return to the coach, he left the bottle on a windowsill and hurried off. A young soldier, who had seen what had happened and had realized our companion's predicament, ran after him and presented him with the few coins that he should have received – there was no question of refusing the money.

We were not long in the coach when we heard that Dr Paddy Flanagan had collapsed on the wall, and that he had to be helped down and sent back to the hotel in a taxi in order to see a doctor. Mr O'Connor, Patricia and Catherine went back up the Wall in order to help. As this caused a delay, Frank stripped off his outer clothing in the bus, much to the amusement of everyone, revealing a white tee-shirt and togs, and set out for a run up the Wall to see if he could be of any help. This caused a great deal of merriment, and several people photographed him as he ran off. However, he arrived too late, for Paddy had already been brought down to the car park. When Frank returned, walking, he could see the crowds of people staring at him in amazement. As we drove off in the coach, we saw Paddy being led by Mr O'Connor and Patricia into a taxi. We now learned that he had collapsed with a sudden attack of dysentery and had vomited; it was most unfortunate. Naturally, all of us were very concerned about him.

Our next stop was the Dingling or mausoleum of the Ming Dynasty emperor Wan Li (1572–1620) – one of the famous Ming Tombs that are situated not far from the Great Wall. During the reign of the Wan Li emperor, whom the Italian Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci tried so hard to visit but never succeeded, there was a period of cultural brilliance. However, during the last half of the emperor's reign, he withdrew from the world and left his court eunuchs to deal with all his business. Enormous sums of money were spent on the court; corruption set in and the financial situation deteriorated. When the Manchus invaded China in 1618, the emperor turned a deaf ear to all pleas to provide money for defence. An easy life, good food and no exercise had turned him into a bloated monster, and because of this he allowed no one to see him except his trusted eunuchs – there were

70,000 of them in the palace. When travelling, he was carried in a sedan chair, hidden from view, and surrounded by other sedan chairs, so that nobody knew which one he was sitting in. Although he was interested in Father Matteo Ricci and sent messages to him, he never met him because of his embarrassment concerning his personal appearance.

In order to get to Wan Li's mausoleum, we drove back the way that we had come, leaving the mountains behind. After some time we took a turning to the left. We now zoomed along a road that led us back towards the mountains. Eventually we reached a magnificent white marble triumphal archway or *pailou* that announced the beginning of the avenue to the tomb, one of the many Ming Tombs scattered about the surrounding countryside. We then bypassed a series of gates: large red buildings with arched openings in the middle, with imperial yellow roofs.



*Spirit Way and stone mythical beast, Ming Tombs*

Next we drove down a long avenue or 'Spirit Way' flanked by pairs of stone figures of people of importance, elephants, camels, and various other

animals, which faced one another across the avenue. We passed another elaborate gate and eventually stopped in large square, in front of the entrance to the walled precincts of the tomb.

We did not go in immediately, for now it was midday and time for lunch. We were led into a small courtyard surrounded by low buildings, and were brought into a couple of pleasantly cool dining rooms, in which there were long tables covered in freshly-laundered cloths. The room was decorated with large and beautiful Ming porcelain jars – reproductions, no doubt! Our picnic lunches, in white cardboard boxes, were brought from the bus, along with crates of orangeade and beer.

We sat down and pitched into our food. Most of us had too much, for in the boxes were slices of Peking roast duck, chicken and other cold meats, slices of rather hard and thinly-buttered bread, two hard-boiled eggs, an apple and a biscuit.

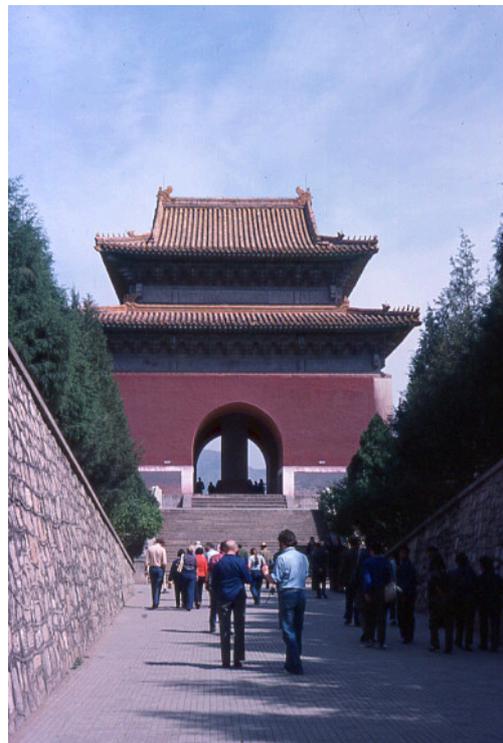


*Grounds and approach to the Wan Li Ming Tomb*

When we had finished our lunch, we stepped out into the warm air and made our way through some beautiful grounds on our way to the tomb. We passed trees, ornamental gateways with steps leading up to them, and colourful small buildings or pavilions. The place was full of local people, all busy taking photos of each other. We were taken into a small and rather packed museum and quickly shown some of the beautiful treasures that had been found in the tomb, such as jade carvings, silver ornaments, and weapons. Propaganda managed to find its way in here too: charts detailed how many workers had been forced to build the tomb, their wages, and the cost of the construction, which amounted to eighteen million ounces of silver.

We then left the grounds, passed more gateways and, at the end of the third courtyard, arrived at the Square Tower. Ascending some steps, we

walked through an arch in the middle, then returned to ground level by more steps on the other side. In front of us now was a large mound, under which the tomb lay. A section of the mound had been cut away, and a modern entrance had been built. As we approached it, our attention was drawn to a small stone slab. We were told that when the tomb was being excavated in 1956, the archaeologists had found a stele at this spot. On it were carved directions to a corridor that led to the entrance, and the distance from the stele to the door of the tomb. We now walked to the entrance, where the archaeologists had dug down vertically, following the usual plan of Chinese tombs. A modern staircase now brought us down to quite a depth.



*The Square Tower as seen from the tomb entrance*

At the bottom, another stone slab was pointed out to us. At this spot a second stone stele had been found, which gave the excavators directions to the doors of the emperor's tomb straight ahead. The presence of these stelae was highly unusual, for normally precautions were kept in order to keep tomb robbers in ignorance of where the tomb lay. We now approached the sacred entrance of the resting place of the Wan Li Emperor, which should have been sealed forever. The huge white marble doors, which were decorated with round humps like studs, were now open, protected by large sheets of glass. An ingenious self-locking device had been used to keep these massive doors shut: a great stone slab, placed in the middle of

the floor behind the doors, which automatically fell against the doors when they had been closed. When the archaeologists set about opening the doors, they pushed an iron bar through the crack between the doors and somehow managed to push the stone slab to one side.

From the antechamber we passed through the doorway and entered the outer hall, which was bare. We then went through another doorway, which had featured the same locking device, and entered the central hall. This was a long, rectangular stone chamber with a curved roof. In it were three small marble thrones, intricately carved, and three large Ming dynasty water jars in which a special oil had been burning, supposedly forever, when the tomb had originally been sealed up. Needless to say, the burning wick in the oil had gone out due to the lack of oxygen, and the oil was still in the jars when the archaeologists found them.

Because of the use of ordinary water jars for this oil, the experts came to the conclusion that the furnishing of this tomb had been done in a great hurry. This was further verified by the presence of three large coffins in the burial hall, and none in the side halls left and right (where they should have been), as the coffins had been made too big for the entrances.

We now entered this main burial hall, which was similar to the central hall, but running at right angles to it. Here we saw three large and rather uninteresting-looking modern reproductions of the coffins on a platform: that of the Emperor (in the middle), his wife the Empress Xiao Duan (who died in the same year as the Emperor, 1620), and his secondary wife, Xiao Jing (who had died in 1612). The archaeologists had discovered that the original coffins had rotted and were beyond repair.

After this we went into one of the empty side halls. We then retraced our steps and left this soulless, though fascinating place, climbed up the staircase, and emerged into the warm sunshine. I had enjoyed our visit to this place, as I had been curious about the Ming tombs for some time.

On our way out of the grounds, we paid a quick visit to another small museum, where we saw reconstructions of the elaborate headgear that the emperor had worn, along with some fine porcelain and objects that had been found in the tomb.

Before we left, some of us took photos of Mrs Sun in the gardens. Back on the coach we drank some more orangeade and started our return journey to Beijing. En route we stopped on the avenue lined with the carved stone figures, and most of us got out of the bus to photograph them.

As we drove back to our hotel, I suddenly felt very tired and rather poorly. Looking out of the window, I saw lorries full of workmen stretched out at the back, fast asleep, despite the wind and noise. No doubt they were in a state of exhaustion. As before, the cyclists were in no hurry whatsoever.



*Mrs Sun in the tomb gardens*

When we reached the city, we stopped at a large Friendship Store, one of the state-run shops built for tourists. A three-storey department store with lifts and wide staircases, it sold high-class merchandise: food, drink, clothing, rolls of fine silk, stationery, writing and art materials, and various other items such as scrolls, fans, embroidery, paintings, modern porcelain (of questionable quality), as well as objects made of wood, cuttlefish, ivory, and – of course – jade (though possibly soapstone). However, I was in no mood for all this, for by now I felt exhausted and unwell; I was weak and slightly dizzy. I just wandered around, taking it easy. At one of the counters I saw some of the lads in our group buying caps. One wanted to purchase a green cap with a red star, of the type worn by the soldiers. However, the ones in stock were too small for him, and the one that did fit him had no star. The girl behind the counter, who was dressed in a brown uniform and had her hair done in short pigtails, told him to wait. She then produced a red plastic star and sewed it on there and then.

At the same counter I bought a comfortable pair of cotton shoes for less than £1 – the type that I had seen people wearing in the streets. I then wandered around the shop and paid an urgent visit to the gents'. After this I realized that there was something definitely wrong with me.

When we finally arrived back at the hotel, I lay on my bed and rested. As I was in no mood for eating, I did not go down for dinner, but changed into my pyjamas and lay in bed. As Christopher went out for a walk after his meal, I was alone for the rest of the evening.

I was short taken once again at about nine o'clock and barely managed to struggle back to bed as I had been paralysed with a sudden onset of pins and needles. After I had recovered somewhat, I made my way to the room

next to mine and tapped on the door. Molly and Peggy, two lively widows, admitted me, and I lay on one of their beds just before I got another attack of pins and needles. They were very good to me and asked what had happened. I told them to the best of my ability, as my voice had almost gone by now. They concluded that I had got dysentery – probably from eating something in Karachi. They kindly gave me a couple of tablets, which they said were very effective.

Shortly afterwards, Christopher, John, and another lad named Donal appeared on the scene. They laughed and joked with me, which made me feel a little better. Soon I was able to bestir myself and return to my room.

Although I had to make several trips to the bathroom during the night, I did manage to get some sleep.