

4 – THE TEMPLE OF HEAVEN

A long, tedious day spent in bed, sick. The time was measured by the nearby Telegraph Building clock playing 'The East is Red' at a leisurely pace every hour. This piece of music, which we were to hear time and time again, had been the *de facto* national anthem sung during the Cultural Revolution. A paean of praise for Mao Zedong (Mao Tse Tung), the first verse goes:

东方红, 太阳升,	The east is red, the sun is rising.
中国出了个毛泽东。	From China appears Mao Zedong.
他为人民谋幸福,	He strives for the people's happiness,
呼尔嗨哟, 他是人民大救星!	Hurrah, he is the people's great saviour!

However the translation of the words from the original folk song runs as follows:

Sesame oil, cabbage hearts,
Want to eat string beans, break off the tips,
Get really lovesick if I don't see you for three days,
Hu-er-hai-yo, oh dear, my third brother.

Outside the sun beat down from a blue sky. Various sounds could be heard from time to time: traffic, people coming and going, people shouting, doors being opened and shut and, for a while, the sharp pops of Ping-Pong balls from outside. I could also hear somebody practising on an oboe in the distance; in the morning I could hear raucous notes and scales, then rapid scales and fragments of melodies coming up to lunchtime.

After they had breakfasted, Patricia and Catherine had come to see how I was feeling, and had given me two more of the tablets that Molly and Peggy had given me. Some of the others had dropped in to say hello, and all of them had been very kind to me. I ate nothing, for I had been troubled with stomach cramps since I had woken up. Fortunately they began to disappear during the afternoon. Although I was disappointed at not being able to visit the Summer Palace and its famous marble boat (a place that I had been particularly looking forward to seeing), I was happy to relax and think. I had given my still camera to Christopher and had asked him to take a few shots of the palace, the lake, and the grounds. I later learned that, in the morning,

the group had visited an arts and crafts factory where they had seen jade being carved, pottery and cloisonné being crafted, bowls being lacquered, snuff bottles being painted from the inside, and wall hangings being made. Our group had stopped for lunch in the grounds of the Summer Palace and had afterwards walked through a long painted wooden gallery to the marble boat, which the last Empress Dowager had had built with money intended for the navy. From there they crossed the lake in a real boat, and afterwards returned to the Forbidden City, where they visited the jewellery halls and the apartments where the emperor's concubines had once lived. I was particularly sorry to have missed this.

Back in the hotel, my companions had eaten their evening meal. Mr O'Connor then came to visit me, and encouraged me to drink some hot milk and eat some toast. I happily did this, for by now I was able to sit up and croak a few words in a weak voice.

In the evening, the group were taken to see a film about Premier Zhou Enlai, who had died at the beginning of the previous year (1976). Regarded then as the most humane member of the Chinese Communist Party (though opinion has changed somewhat recently), his death had been deeply mourned by the populace. First of all my companions had watched a film of people filing past his coffin. They quickly realized that everyone in the cinema, including their guides and especially Mrs Sun, was in floods of tears. After this came a black-and-white documentary film about his life, which stressed how much he had helped the people and how much everybody had loved him.

I heard several different opinions about this film when I received a number of visitors in the evening. Some complained that it was boring, others mentioned how emotional the people in the cinema had become, others thought that it was very stupid, and others said that it was good and quite interesting. However, I came to the conclusion that I had not missed much.

This morning I felt a little better, but stayed in bed. For breakfast I ordered some hot milk and toast but received a trayful of food, including fried eggs and mandarin oranges. The chef must have decided that a meal of toast and hot milk was not enough to survive on! The *tàng niú nǎi* (hot milk) that I had requested had been interpreted as *suān niú nǎi* (sour milk) and so I received a bowl of thick, evil-smelling yogurt that I most certainly was not able to stomach. However, once again my Chinese came to the rescue, and I was able to walk out to the man at the reception desk on my floor and explain to him what I wanted.

Later, when I tired of lying in bed, I rose, had a shower, spruced myself up, dressed, and sat up for the rest of the morning, writing my diary and a postcard home to the accompaniment of 'The East is Red' every hour.

This morning my companions visited the Second Middle School of Normal College (that was how the Chinese name was translated into English). This school, which had 1,700 students, taught politics, history, geography, mathematics, chemistry, Chinese, English, Japanese, French, agriculture, hygiene, physical training, music, and the fine arts. Interestingly, there was also a course in classical Chinese – a subject that would not have been allowed some years previously. There were workshops in the school, and my companions had seen the students experimenting with electronics and microswitches. They also witnessed a class of students studying the workings of a diesel engine.

The members of our group were brought into an English class, where they found a banner that read, 'Welcome to our Aunties and Uncles from Ireland – thank you for visiting'. (Young Chinese children regularly use 'auntie' or 'uncle' as a term of respect when speaking to older people outside the family.) My companions were all addressed as 'comrade' rather than 'sir' or 'madam' by the older children. They were told that the school slogan was, 'Learn well – serve the people', and that there had been no expulsions since the Cultural Revolution in 1966. (This could have been quite true, since all the schools had been closed during the chaos between 1966 and 1976!)

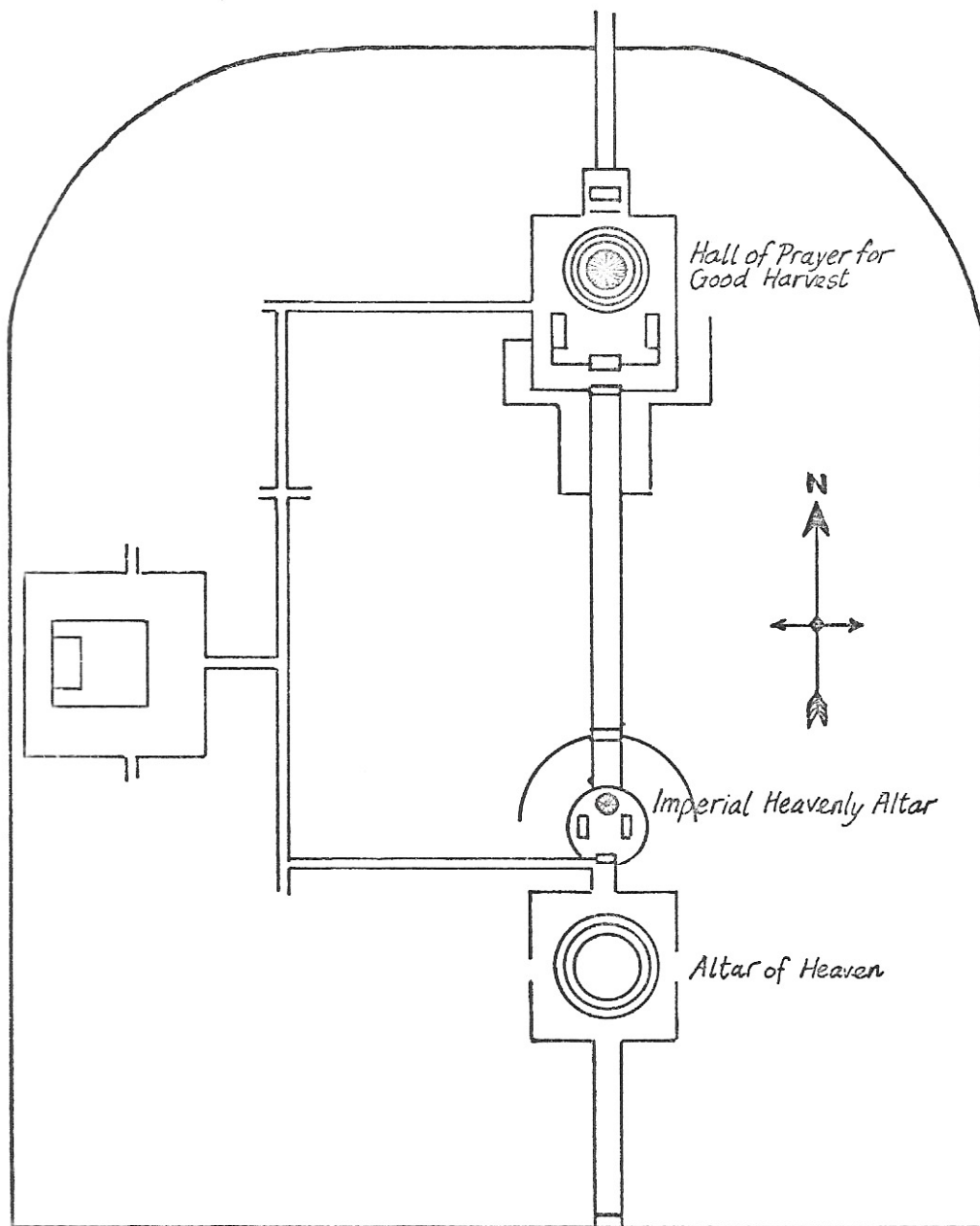
After being brought around various classrooms, my colleagues were treated to a performance of music and song. A girl played the *pípá* (a pear-shaped lute with four strings, held vertically) and another played a Chinese fiddle (probably an *èrhú* or two-stringed fiddle, also held vertically); I was told by everyone that they had performed exquisitely. When our group left, the students waved vigorously to them from the windows. None of them wore uniforms, and the school building was very plain.

At lunchtime I went down to join my companions in the dining room, where I pecked at some meat, bread and soup, for my appetite had not yet fully recovered. I still felt very weak and dizzy, but as we were scheduled to visit the Temple of Heaven in the afternoon (a place that I had really wanted to visit having read so much about it), I decided to go with them.

The weather was still beautiful when we set off in the afternoon. We zoomed down Chang'an Avenue and then turned southwards into what used to be the Outer City in the old days – where the commoners lived. We drove around various back streets, all of which looked quite quaint. After a while we arrived at the seven-hundred-acre park in which the Temple of Heaven was situated, and drove along a narrow roadway between the trees.

Here, more or less in the centre of the park, was the complex of three large architectural enclosures, running from north to south, which rank as one of the most outstanding architectural creations in the world. The general name given to these enclosures is 'Temple of Heaven', for it was here where the Emperor, acting as high priest on behalf of the people, would perform

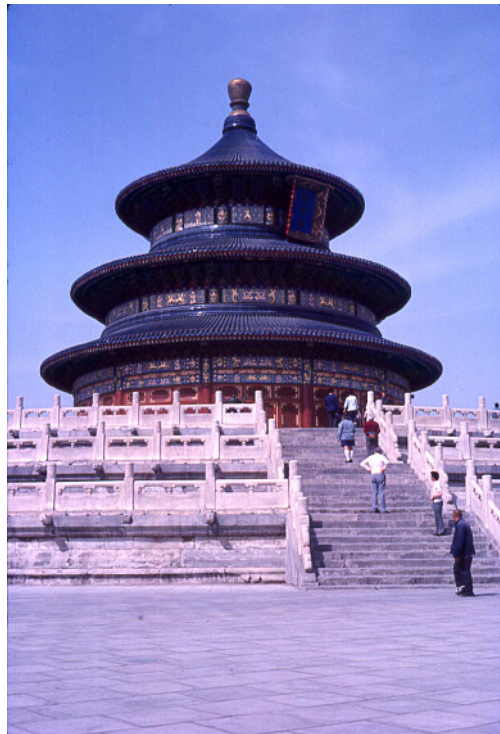
important acts of worship to Heaven once a year on 21st December, the winter solstice.



Temple of Heaven

The first enclosure, to the north, is square, and represents the earth which, in ancient times, was believed to be flat and square. Inside are buildings painted in imperial colours. North of the square's centre is a large circular marble platform, approached from three concentric terraces with balustrades, and steps at the four compass points. On the platform is the large and beautiful Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests, which is circular and has

an unusual three-tiered roof of blue porcelain tiles. This magnificent wooden building is ninety-nine feet high and is highly decorated inside. No nails were used during the construction and the beams of the roof are dovetailed.



The Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests



Entrance to the Imperial Heavenly Altar

A causeway, raised to the height of the surrounding trees, runs southwards from this enclosure for some four hundred yards and links it to the next: a semicircular courtyard, with two buildings east and west within it, and a small but beautiful temple, similar to the previous one, called the

Imperial Heavenly Altar, which is in the centre. This is where the spirit tablets of the First Ancestor, Shang Di, and the other Imperial Ancestors were kept; they were used as an important part of the worshipping rites to Heaven developed by Han dynasty Confucians, and based on very ancient rites and beliefs.



The Imperial Heavenly Altar, and detail of the stairway and marble slab



The approach to the Altar of Heaven

The Emperor, during the cold dawn of the winter solstice, would start his elaborate rituals and sacrifices by heading southwards from this enclosure to the last square in which is situated the large circular stone Altar of Heaven,

210 feet in diameter at the base, with three terraces, white marble balustrades, and four sets of steps at the cardinal points. Three was the Heavenly Number, and the circular Altar represented Heaven, which was believed to be a circular dome above the earth. Flanked by two Masters of Ceremonies, and accompanied by music and dancing at ground level, the Emperor would kneel on the centre stone and prostrate himself northwards, thus humbling himself before Heaven in the attitude of a subject. The South was the all-important direction, with associations with other concepts: fire, red, summer and birds. (Even to this day, Chinese compasses point southwards – not northwards as ours do.)



The Altar of Heaven (top) and the view northwards from the Altar

The first ceremony was to meet the spirits of Shang Di and the former Emperors, who were thought to inhabit the spirit tablets. After this there were sacrifices and libations: bullocks, jade and silk were offered to the spirits. This elaborate ritual was last performed when the self-elected

Emperor, the President of the Republic of China, Yuan Shikai, carried out the ceremonies in 1912 at the beginning of a so-called 'democratic' era that lasted just a few years.

Our tour of the complex began with the two enclosures to the south: the Imperial Heavenly Altar and the Altar of Heaven. In the former, the acoustic properties of the enclosure were demonstrated for us. Standing on a stone slab leading to the altar, our guide Mr Chang clapped his hands and we heard the sound echo once. He moved back to another slab, repeated the procedure and we heard two echoes. Stepping backwards and clapping from another slab produced three echoes. When we talked or whispered against the wall, the sound was amplified.

When standing at the top and in the centre of the Altar of Heaven, our voices were amplified, and we encountered the same phenomenon when we spoke to each other when standing on stones directly opposite each other around the centre. The effect was most unusual. Fortunately we were not rushed this time, and so I was able to take plenty of shots with my ciné and still cameras. Being here was like a dream come true for me; it was such a thrill being able to stand on the top of the Altar of Heaven, knowing that in the past only the great emperors had had access to such a sacred spot.

Although there was a slight mist, it was sunny, and the place looked beautiful; quite a number of local people were admiring the fine architecture. We were then led back to the bus, which drove us to the northern enclosure, containing the exquisite Hall of Prayer for Good Harvest, which we photographed and visited. Again, I was thrilled to see this famous and very striking landmark under such perfect conditions.

I had hoped that we would also be taken to see the Altar of the Earth and the rest of this complex, but we drove off at speed, blowing the horn all the way, to visit a new underground railway. What a contrast!

Shortly afterwards we arrived at the entrance to the subway, which was in the middle of a main street. We were taken down in a lift to a large hallway where, much to our astonishment, we found long tables covered in white cloths with cups of tea on them, and a large group of Chinese people sitting at them, waiting. When we sat down, a very ordinary-looking young man in a green jacket appeared; he was introduced and applauded. He gave us a briefing about the underground railway, which was translated into English for us by Mr Chang, and into Cantonese for the other people by a young lady. Fortunately the introduction was short and sweet; as I was tired by now, I did not bother to take notes.

After this we were brought down into the station, which was large and spotlessly clean. It looked quite modern in style. After a short wait, a smart, clean and comfortable electric train pulled in, and we clambered aboard. It was nice inside, though a little noisy. The man who had briefed us had

mentioned this and the fact that they were hoping to rectify this problem. The driver was a good-looking young lady in a green uniform, who emerged from the front of the train when we stopped briefly at a station. She blew a whistle in order to summon us back into the train, and once again we were off. We noticed an unusual smell inside: it seemed to be a mixture of new metal and plastic. The fare was very cheap: just ten *fen* (about 3p) to travel any distance.

We finally stopped at the Beijing Railway Station, where our coach was waiting for us. We drove back to the familiar Chang'an Avenue and stopped outside the large Beijing Hotel. From here we followed our guide down a busy side street to a local department store. Although it was laid out like a typical European department store, it was old-fashioned, cool and dark inside. Unlike the Friendship Store, it was full of local people who were all on the go but never in any particular hurry. Their manners were excellent; there was no pushing, shoving or arguing. I noticed that nobody was obliged to buy anything, for one could have things brought out for inspection, then walk away without purchasing what was on offer. Advertising of the goods in the shop was minimal and confined to crude painted boards depicting what was for sale. Being here was like stepping back in time.

As I was not in the mood for shopping, I just looked around quickly and left. I then slowly ambled back to the bus, gazing at the shop windows and the people, who stared at me – the *dà bízi* ('big nose') – in wonderment. I passed several bookshops that had large banners in the windows advertising the fifth volume of the Selected Works of Mao Zedong, which had recently been published by Chairman Hua. There were a few clothes shops with materials displayed in the window. In one corner of the street, people were flocking to a small stall, where two women were selling lemon ice pops. I decided to buy one and asked the price, which was a trifling sum. It proved to be pleasantly cool and refreshing.

I then ambled back to where the coach was parked and waited for the others. I now had time to observe the people around me and the cyclists on the road. Once again I noticed that, although everybody was moving at a good pace, nobody was in a mad rush; everyone looked quite calm and relaxed. For the first time I realized how ungainly Western people must have looked to these people, who walked and moved with such exemplary poise and deportment. Nearly every person was dressed the same manner, in blue, grey or black suits of a rather unflattering design, and here and there could be seen the green uniforms of soldiers, whose presence we had noticed everywhere. I saw few tall people; although not tall myself compared to other Europeans, I now felt tall for the first time, as so many people here were shorter than I was. I derived a certain amount of pleasure from smiling at the people's staring faces and watching as their looks of bewilderment

vanished and warm, friendly smiles broke out over their faces. A few words of greeting in Chinese guaranteed even friendlier smiles. Everyone looked as though they were well or at least reasonably fed, and I could see no sign of beggars.

The others soon returned and we were driven back to our hotel, which was not far away. This was the last time we would see Beijing by day, as we were due to leave this evening for Nanjing ('South Capital'). I was sorry to leave, for I would have loved to have seen more of this vast and interesting city – we had seen only a tiny fraction of it.

After an uneventful evening, we left our cases outside our rooms at ten o'clock and were in the coach by 10.20 p.m. on the dot, as we were told that the train would not wait! However, there was no sign of five members of our party, and so Patricia and Catherine had to go back into the hotel in order to find them. After a few minutes, two ladies hurried out and joined us; one of the ladies had not realized that her watch had stopped, and had been sitting in her room, waiting. After a short delay, the remaining latecomers (three ladies who were quite tipsy) were led down the steps and into the bus. Several of us were quite embarrassed by this turn of events, and told Mrs Sun so. Although she looked rather concerned, she told us not to worry. We felt that they had let the side down. However, I noticed that Messrs Yao and Wei were laughing to themselves but trying to look serious at the same time.

We arrived at Beijing Railway Station at about 10.45 p.m., and quickly made our way through the large and crowded building. We walked down a staircase to the platform; to our right were the green carriages of our train and directly opposite the bottom of the staircase was our 'soft class' carriage, which we quickly boarded. This was essentially a first-class carriage normally used by diplomats and foreign VIPs; ordinary people travelled in the 'hard class' carriages, on wooden seats. As we found our way to our four-bed sleeping berths and bid a hasty goodbye to Mrs Sun and Mr Chang, the doors were slammed shut, whistles were blown, and we moved off just four and a half minutes after we had boarded. If we had been delayed any longer, we would have missed the train!

Frank Cahill, Dave Tyndall, Paddy Flanagan and I shared a berth. It was small but comfortable. The walls were painted a light shade of green and the fittings looked a little antiquated. Under the window a small table was fixed to the wall, and on it was a white cloth, a small lamp with a decorated shade, a plant in an earthenware pot, four of the familiar large mugs with lids, and a gigantic thermos flask underneath. On the floor were four pairs of plastic sandals for our use, and on the beds were beautifully embroidered pillows, sheets, blankets and towels.

The radio was on full blast, but we managed to silence it by turning the volume control under the table down to zero. Next we had to do something

about the temperature, for it was stifling hot in the berth. We turned on the fan, but that almost blew us out of our bunk beds. We then tried to open the window, but it was too stiff and would not budge. As we decided that we could not leave the sliding door open, we tried the window again, and after a good deal of heaving and pushing, we eventually got it open a few inches.

Paddy Flanagan went up top; Frank and Dave stayed below. Dave, who took a sleeping tablet, went out like a light and began snoring. I was hoping to read myself to sleep, but the light was soon turned off. I lay on my bunk bed in the darkness, wide awake and unable to sleep.

The train bumped and swayed as it journeyed through the night, blowing its whistle every now and then. I lay in my bed, listening to the various sounds inside and outside as we travelled to Nanjing.