

4 – BEIJING

Up at seven this morning; breakfast was served half an hour later, and at eight we were collected and driven to the Capital Iron and Steel Complex in the western suburbs of the city. This was a visit that we were all dreading, as nobody was interested. We were surprised to enter what almost appeared to be a separate city, with an impressive landscaped approach to the main reception area. A car drove ahead, directing us to a large, modern building. Here we were met by a pleasant lady who brought us upstairs to a briefing room. We sat in soft armchairs sipping tea while she told us about the place. Because I was feeling rather sleepy this morning, having gone to bed late last night, I paid little attention to what she was saying. As well as smelting iron and steel, the company made electronic components and various other things. The factory had also organized cultural activities for the workers, such as painting, singing, and so forth. Judging by what we were told, the place seemed to be quite efficiently run; a general loosening up and a turn for the better had begun in 1979.

After the briefing we asked a few questions and then set off in the bus, once again following the car, to visit the complex proper. When we left the reception building, a small pavilion peeping through the trees and a new waterfall under construction, we plunged into the grimy section of the foundry proper. The place was huge, stretching over acres and acres of polluted land, where shrubbery and flowers grew poorly. All around us were large, ugly buildings and miles of pipes. We ended up in a building where we donned bright yellow plastic helmets and went up in a lift. Here we examined furnaces and broken-up lumps of ore on conveyor belts. The whole process meant little or nothing to us. Fortunately it was not too hot, as the building was open to the elements.

We then drove to a nearby blast furnace, where we could watch the process in comfort and safety on television screens. Computers were in use here; the displays looked suitably impressive. After we had visited this place, we were driven back towards the reception building. However, we were now brought into a different building and shown the computer system, which was operated mostly by women. Everything was explained to us using an illuminated diagram.

We finally wished our hosts goodbye and were driven back to our guest house. My companions, especially Paddy, enthused about the place, but I

had not been that impressed. To me the foundry was average, or perhaps more than average, as no doubt it was a model factory. I had noticed that everything in Beijing seemed to be a cut above everything else in China.

Back at our guest house, we went into the reception room at the gate and discovered that we could buy postcards and stamps there – something that our guides had never told us about. They, especially Miss Liu, had been buying these things for us until now. As we had little time to spare before lunch, I sat outside writing my diary.

After lunch we were collected and driven to the office where Miss Liu worked for Youxie, and were introduced to her superiors. We learned that the building had originally been used as the Italian Embassy; because of this, the architecture was a little fussy – especially the ceilings. However, the atmosphere was dead inside. We were introduced to a pleasant bespectacled man who wore a grey suit and tie. He invited us to sit down in the plush armchairs and, while we sipped tea, droned on about the history of Youxie and the hope of ‘cementing the relations between our two countries’. I went into a daze and was momentarily stunned when Paddy suddenly asked my opinion about something that the man had been speaking about. I recovered moments later and managed to add a couple of relevant points.

Our meeting was abruptly (and mercifully) terminated at 3.30 p.m., and off we drove to the Great Hall of the People in Tiananmen Square. As we had little time to spare, we were given five minutes to photograph the place. Although I had not brought my camera with me, I crossed the road with the others in order to look at the huge and rather dreary Soviet-style building. The heat here was incredible – it was like a furnace. I was glad to get back in the bus and be driven to the nearby entrance. Here we were greeted by Noel Kilkenny, whom we had met the previous day, and ushered inside to meet Mr Chu Tunan, Vice-Chairman of the National People’s Congress. This was an old man in his eighties, with a wrinkled face and small beady eyes. Photographers snapped pictures as Paddy and he shook hands, and a video camera recorded us together. We were then lined up against a familiar-looking painted screen to have a group shot taken.

After this we were led into a huge room and invited to sit down in large armchairs. Here we were given damp towels, cold drinks and tea. The old man then began a tedious speech with the standard greetings and continued with the usual hackneyed platitudes, which Miss Liu translated. However, the old boy did chuckle now and then, and later was inspired to wax eloquent by a remark that Paddy made. Feeling rather drowsy by now, I could see Ercus and the ladies across the way laughing and smiling – they probably noticed that I was nodding off. I learned later that the two Chinese men behind me had fallen fast asleep. Mr Kilkenny had also dozed off – and he was in sight of Mr Chu!

The meeting lasted at least half an hour. We then rose, shook hands with old Mr Chu and left. Our guides were delighted, for most people only got ten or fifteen minutes with him. Apparently Mr Chu had been a great scholar and, among other things, had translated Greek myths into Chinese. He had been delighted to speak with Paddy, who had brought art and culture into the conversation. Both men had presented gifts; Paddy had been given a film and a video about Tibet.

We now drove back to our guest house, where we quickly got ourselves ready to go to this evening's dinner party given by the Kilkennys in their residence. We set off soon after six o'clock, but got stuck in heavy traffic. We arrived at the slightly strange-looking ambassadorial complex about a half hour later. We walked to the Chargé d'Affaires' house, where we were warmly greeted by Noel and his wife. It felt very strange to step into their very European home with its fine furnishings and to look out over their lawn, where we could see garden furniture. While sipping a glass of sherry, I chatted to a very pleasant Chinese sculptress, Professor Shi Yi, and a lovely though slightly shy girl. This delightful young lady, who must have been in her early twenties, had just finished studying and was now employed at governmental work. She had been working in the Irish embassy for just two months. She had big, wide, innocent eyes, and her English was perfect, despite her apologies.

When dinner was served, I managed to sit beside her and engage her in conversation. The food was delicious, but the service was slow and elaborate. Ladies were served first and it took a long time to serve everyone at the table. My pretty companion seemed to be eating European food for the first time and was consequently puzzled by all the knives and forks. Pauline and I helped her by explaining all our unfamiliar conventions. Although eating Chinese food was very pleasant and much more informal, I found it good to eat real Irish food after being so long out of the country!

We had all been dressed rather formally to begin with, but now jackets were removed as the excellent wine began to take effect. The atmosphere became more relaxed and everyone laughed a lot. When the meal was finished, we wandered into the adjoining rooms for coffee and Bailey's Irish Cream liqueur. Such decadence! I was asked to play something on the strange Hsinghai upright piano, and I obliged with a little Irish music: Carolan airs and some songs. Miraculously the piano was in tune, but the hammers seemed to be covered in cotton wool. Paddy played a familiar piece by Debussy (he played very well indeed) and the girl played a couple of her party pieces. Then, all of a sudden, just as things were livening up, the party came to an abrupt end. Most of us had a sneaking suspicion that Paddy had orchestrated this – perhaps thinking that this was the way things were done here in China. (We had indeed noticed that abrupt endings often occurred

after meals and meetings here.) Disappointed, we said goodnight to everyone and walked back to our minibus. The young lady got into a big black limosine and was driven home. I was sorry that I had failed to get her name and address, for she very much wanted to come to Ireland. There was no doubt that well-educated Chinese people are exceptionally charming.

We now found ourselves at a loose end back in the humble surroundings of our guest house. I put the time to good use by writing some of my diary, then went to bed, for I was tired.



The Great Wall of China, Mutianyu section

After breakfast this morning we set off in our minibus at 8.30 for the Great Wall of China. Instead of going to the popular section at Badaling, where some of us had been before, we drove instead to Mutianyu, where there would be fewer people. The journey was uneventful, except that at one point we ran into a traffic jam caused by police checking vehicles. Mr Wang sat beside me and told me about his background. It turned out that he was a member of the Hui Moslem community. In a long, interesting conversation

that could not have taken place ten years previously, he explained the origin of the Hui people, their contacts with Arab missionaries and traders, and their language and script. Later he left me to talk to somebody else and I began to fall asleep.

I woke up when we began to approach the mountains, which by now were enveloped in heat haze. After a while we caught sight of the famous wall winding its way up and down the mountains, and stopped in a large car park beside a few other coaches. We had planned to go up to the wall in the cable car, but as the electricity had failed, we were obliged to ascend the thousand-odd steps towards it. Off we set: Ercus first at full speed despite the heat, then young Mr Zhang and I at about half speed. Because of the heat, I found it tough going. The Chinese visitors were all using the steps, including little toddlers. A lovely girl with a parasol ventured to say hello to me, but that was as much as she could manage, despite her brother telling me that she wanted to speak English with me. Another young lady, possibly the girl's sister, looked very attractive in a tight red dress. Yet again I was dazzled by the beauty of these delightful creatures.

At last we reached the wall and I stopped to rest in the shade and drink a carton of orange juice that had been brought for us. The view up here was far from perfect, for on one side the wall and surrounding scenery disappeared into the mist, against the light, and on the other side the cable car terminus, which was quite an eyesore, could be seen. I walked around with Mr Zhang, took a few photos, and was included in a Chinese snapshot along with Pauline and Pat.



Miss Liu, Mr Zhang and Mr Wang (centre three) at the Great Wall of China

At about midday I decided to go down to the car park and followed Mr Zhang. By the time we reached the bottom of the steps, my legs felt quite shaky. I met the other two guides and sat with them on a low wall until the

others appeared. As usual, my companions had found a gift shop and were spending money again. I had to pull Pauline out of the shop as the guides were becoming anxious. We then walked to a restaurant around the corner, where we went upstairs for a good meal. I was quite hungry after my exertions!

Fed and refreshed, we boarded the bus and drove off. I soon fell asleep and woke up later to find ourselves heading for the centre of Beijing. I was puzzled as to why we had not been taken to the Ming Tombs. There was no sign of us turning northwards again; instead we were dropped off at our guest house shortly before four o'clock. I was quite disappointed. It was only then that I learned from the others that because we had been taken to the quieter place to see the Great Wall, it was not possible to include the Ming Tombs.

Just as Ercus and I were sprucing ourselves up, Pauline came around and asked if we would like to go to the zoo to see the pandas. As Ercus and I had never seen pandas before, we agreed to go with her. We drank a cup of tea, then walked to the crossroads to catch the number 107 bus, which Pauline had been told about. I told the lady conductor where we were going and that we did not know where to get off. The bus was crowded at first, but as we journeyed out to the suburbs, it began to empty. At one stage a ravishing girl dressed in green got on with a friend, and our eyes met for a seemingly endless moment or two. I winked at Ercus and he nodded in approval. Pauline, who knew what we were thinking, made a wise crack. Later the girl in green moved up a little and sat down. Her pal then got off and I sat down in the free seat behind her. With my arm on the back of her seat, I unashamedly allowed her long and lustrous jet-black hair to brush against it. I was thrilled when she turned around to say a few words in English to me. A brief conversation in English and Chinese followed, then it was suddenly time to get off the bus. The young lady left with us, gave us instructions on where to go, said goodbye and crossed the road.

We then found our way to the nearby zoo, where I paid for the tickets. Ercus bought a map, and we went inside to find the pandas. As we wandered around, we stopped to look at members of the racoon family, observed various different types of birds, watched monkeys tumbling about, young lovers walking arm in arm (I found this particular species most interesting), and saw elephants, tigers, bears, polar bears... but no pandas. At last, when I was really beginning to lose interest, we stumbled across a small red panda. There seemed to be no large black and white ones. I asked the official at the exit and got the impression that they had been sent elsewhere.

By now I was feeling very exhausted and barely made it to the bus. I was not at all pleased when Pauline decided that we should get off the bus early

and take a short cut to our guest house. We followed her and soon got hopelessly lost. I gave her an envelope with the address of the guest house on it, and let her sort us out. Finally, after asking several people the way, we found the right alley. After a long, tiring walk, we eventually reached the guest house. We arrived half an hour late for dinner, but fortunately it was only just being served. I made short work of the meal, for I felt extremely hungry. By now I was feeling quite weak and run down.

After dinner I lay down on my bed for a short rest, but woke at 12.30 a.m. to find Ericus fast asleep in his bed! I washed my teeth, got straight into bed, and fell asleep instantly.