

Vlachos, P (2002). "Notes from Beijing". *The Ethical Record*, 107 (2). March 2002. pp. 5-7.
ISSN 0014 - 1690

Abstract

This paper contains notes from a talk on mainland China's (PRC) ongoing opening up to the free-market. The paper, using an ethnographic approach, notes the 'two-speed' transition of the economy in which increasing affluence in larger, eastern cities is contrasted with labour intensive, low wage regions. The paper considers these more recent developments against the backdrop of progressive and humanistic western philosophical ideas brought to China in the 1920s. The paper is presented as a travel log, highlighting some negative effects of modernism on the urban fabric, as well as the travels of Chinese scholars such as Sun Yat Sen and Hu Shih to the West and their contributions to progressive thought.

NOTES FROM BEIJING

Peter Vlachos

Lecture to the Ethical Society, 17 February 2002

I spent two and a half weeks over late December/early January past in Beijing, the capital of the People's Republic of China (PRC). This was my first trip to China, although I have previously visited Singapore and also lived and visited cities with notable Chinese populations, eg Toronto, Sydney and Vancouver.

My own interests with regards to things Chinese are cultural output of contemporary artists of Chinese origin, especially first and second-generation overseas born- I am a trustee of the national British Chinese Artists Association. I have a rudimentary knowledge of the language along with years of living in close proximity to Chinese communities in Britain and Canada. However, I would not pretend to be a specialist in Chinese history or philosophy.

*I refer to things and people proper to the PRC as 'Chinese' with a capital 'C' whereas in the more general sense and in non-PRC context it will be 'Chinese' with a small 'c'.

Two and a half weeks is a fair amount of time to spend as a visitor in a city, even one as large as Beijing. While it allowed for plenty of time to see the tourists sites (with the benefit of very few other tourists around), it more importantly gave scope to see a little bit more beneath the surface - a glimpse at everyday life.

Beijing ('northern capital') lies in the north-east part China. It lies in Hebei province although it is, along with Shanghai, Tianjin, and Chongqing, one of the four 'national municipalities' under central government control.

The city is divided into 18 administrative districts. Beijing's population of 11 million people plus some 3 million 'transients' includes people from all of China's 56 nationally recognised ethnic minorities (many of which are exempt from the one-child policy).

The government had recently announced that Beijing's GDP had just reached the equivalent of USD 3000 per capita. This places Beijing in the 'middle' rather than 'developing' band in terms of economic status although of course the vast majority of Beijingers survive fairly well on about USD 100 per month and in the rural areas far less.

Arriving to the city by road from the modern airport one is struck immediately by the well-paved major through-fares, tall buildings and general sense of orderliness.

Beijing's recorded history spans some 3000 years including acting as capital of 5 imperial dynasties as well as the PRC. The 500 000 year old 'Peking Man' was unearthed nearby

Historic Gates Lost

The city is laid out in a grid-like fashion so that it is particularly easy for anyone familiar with similar eg north American cities to find their way around fairly easily despite any language barrier. There is a clean and efficient underground system with just two lines: the 'Loop' circular line and the 'East West' line

From the Forbidden City in the centre there are a series of 'ring roads' which try but ultimately are unable to address the traffic gridlock problems. It is sad that the broad avenues which make up the rings roads have lost the historic gates which often now only remain in their names eg Xizhimen, Dongzhimen etc ('-men' means 'gate').

There were the 'must sees' like the huge Forbidden City with its 999 rooms each with its own history purpose (and many with stories of intrigue!); and Tian'anmen Square with its expansive 440000 square meters where up to a million people can gather.

Overlooking the Square of the 'Gate of Heavenly Peace' was one of the very few images of Mao I came across. On either side of Mao's portrait in huge gold characters on a red backdrop was written two slogans: on the left 'Long Live the People's Republic of China' and on the right 'Long Live the Great Union of the People's of the World'. These were some of the few, rapidly disappearing remnants of the socialist idealism under which millions upon millions of Chinese citizens have lived over the past decades.

Other sites of note were the new Summer Palace, an hour's bus-ride to the north-west of the city. Built around a beautiful lake, the palace was burned down by the 'Eight Allied Forces' (mostly British and French) during the Opium Wars 'to make the Chinese see reason' (sic).

Beijing's many parks were a treat. Some like Tian Tan Park south of the city centre contained beautiful temples as well as there lovely grounds for strolling. Jingshan Park immediately north of the Forbidden City offered unparalleled views from up high. One of my favourite parks was the tranquil Beihai Park built as a royal garden near the Forbidden City in the 1179.

There were also some lesser, but no less interesting tourist gems: the Lama Temple, and Confucius Temple interesting for their architecture and artwork.

(A side-note on religion: Though the PRC remains steadfastly an officially secular state, I did see people worshipping freely in the various temples or openly discussing their christian faith. The potential 'muslim' problem in the western provinces is reported in the press as a regional rather than religious issue thereby aiding to diffuse possible conflict.)

A little out of the way but well worth the visit was the former Prince Gong's Palace now restored to a park complete with a beautifully maintained small peking opera house. The opera house, which seats maybe a hundred, features a traditional wooden platform stage, intricate floral wall paintings and hanging lanterns in the typical chinese style.

Another 'must-see' site was the Sun Yat Sen Memorial Hall in Zhong Shan Park. Alas, there was not much tourist interest (even less I suspect due to the cold weather and low season). Sun Yat Sen is honoured as a 'free-runner to the revolution' according to the signs but the sleeping attendants and generally lacklustre maintenance of the architecturally interesting Hall seemed to indicate a somewhat lesser intent.

The 'Chinese Renaissance' Of The 1920s

The period of the 1920s (ie after the Republican revolution but before the Communist one) has been called the 'Chinese Renaissance' with good reason. It

seems to have been a period of flourishing outward-lookingness at least in certain intellectual circles.

I visited the former home of the writer Lu Xun (Lu Hsun). Lu Xun is widely regarded as a great moderniser of Chinese literature in his insistence in using the vernacular rather than classical formal writing style. He was a prolific writer: short stories, essays, youthfully exuberant 'calls to arms' etc. It is unfortunate that few of his works are readily available in translation even now.

Hu Shih Lectured At South Place

Another interesting figure is the writer and educationalist Hu Shih. Hu Shih sought to modernise China importing western concepts such as evolutionary pragmatism. We must recall that even in the present a fundamental difference between west-European and Chinese philosophical thought is the lack in the latter of the concept of 'critical thinking'.

Hu Shih is linked to the South Place Ethical Society in that he gave a lecture to the Society in November 1925 at the old South Place. The talk was on 'China and the West', a favourite topic of his. The title was announced in the *Monthly Record* (as it was then called) as well as in the appeal pamphlet issued by the Society in the following year (1926) to raise funds for the building of the Conway Hall. Unfortunately we do not seem to have a record of the talk he gave although we know he later spoke on the topic on many occasions.



Hu Shih

Hu Shih studied philosophy under John Dewey at Columbia University and went on to become the Chinese ambassador to the USA. He later became president of the Academia Sinica in Taiwan. I found his portrait at Lu Xun's house, alongside other Chinese intellectuals of the period and photos of Huxley and Darwin.

It is said Hu's ambition 'to modernise' China intellectually was ultimately not successful but neither did he wholly fail in recognising that the period was one which gave opportunity for new ideas to be imported to China.

The long term effects of economic reform have yet to be seen. We see on the rise in Beijing a 'two-speed' economy in which generally the standard of life is improving but at a cost of pollution, re-emerging class divisions etc.

I would highly recommend to anyone to visit Beijing. It is a fascinating, clean, welcoming and safe city despite its size.

Recommended Reading:

Simon Lewis. *A Rough Guide to Beijing*. Penguin, London 2000

Jerome B. Grieder. *Hu Shih and the Chinese Renaissance: Liberalism in the Chinese Revolution, 1917-1937*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970.

The views expressed in this Journal are not necessarily those of the Society.