

THE GENEROSITY OF DR FUNG

July 1990

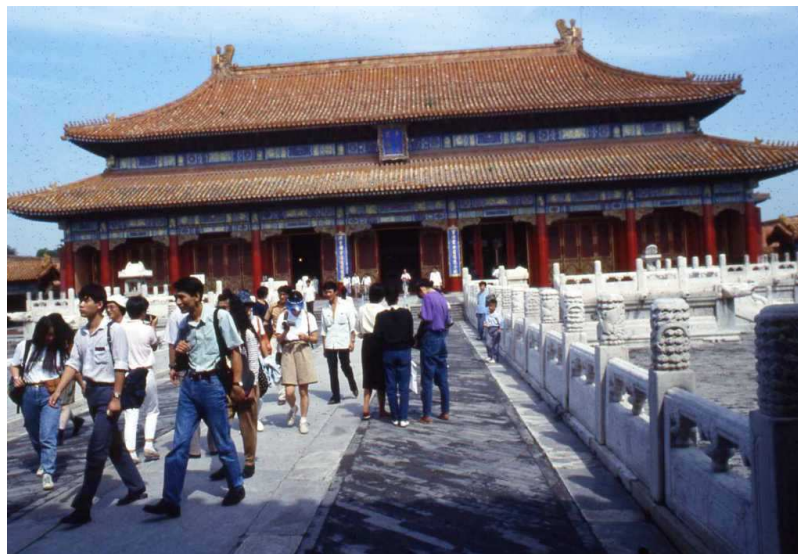


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Early in 1990, I received an invitation from a Professor Xi, of Beijing Normal University, to come to Beijing to give a talk to her staff. The International Association for the Assessment of Educational Achievement, which hyper-contracts to 'IEA', would be holding their Annual Meeting at Qinghua University, Beijing, in August 1990, and as I was Hong Kong representative of IEA, I would be attending. So I had a couple of good reasons to go to Beijing that summer even though I had ideological reasons that inclined me to refuse to go. The Tiananmen Massacre was only a year previous, even if all impressions were that it was business as usual.



Let me start with IEA. Its main function is to compare countries with each other on various aspects of educational achievement. They'd just published their second maths and science survey, at which President George Bush Snr was seriously pissed off at the poor showing of US high schools. In the high handed manner that his damaged son, Dubya, adopted on rather different and more devastating matters, Bush Snr told the American IEA representatives to get IEA to redefine the age groups in future IEA studies in a way that would favour the performance of American students; otherwise the USA would pull out of IEA, which would be a major blow as the US was a major source of funding. The American IEA reps comprised ultra-cool, smooth-tongued Ivy League Republican Party professionals, the senior member showing his human sensitivity by bringing with him his two leggy, wide-mouthed blond daughters, looking like high IQ drum-majorettes, if that's not an oxymoron. No IEA members objected to the US demands. When discussing the matter with other members prior to the vote, I was tempted to object

myself but was warned not to, there was too much at stake. I was relieved, despite my anger. I knew that engaging these bow-tied bully boys in high stakes debate would leave me sorely wounded. As to the poor showing of the US schools, it was later suggested that the problem wasn't the sampling but the US curriculum, which was described as 'a mile wide and an inch deep', forcing students to rely on rote learning – which ironically is what Westerners accuse Chinese and Japanese students of doing.¹

The only worthwhile thing emerging from the IEA meeting is the sightseeing. The Great Wall



at Badaling is impressive. A wide path runs along the top of the Wall, between high towers and turrets, the Wall itself winding over the hills and into the distance. The woodwork and the stonework looked remarkably well preserved on close inspection. And so it should. This section was built in the 1960s: a Chisneyland version, if you will.

We visit the splendid Summer Palace for a reception. China is heavily into swing, big band style. The chief of the Chinese contingent, a tall handsome man, is fanatical about ballroom dancing. He'd arranged some pretty girls as partners for us visitors. They look terrified. A pretty little teenager is pushed into my arms. She is so delicate, so fragile, I feel she'll shatter. She can't dance, she can't speak English, she is trembling. After less than 30 seconds of this torture, the poor child flees back to the other girls. I feel bad, she feels bad, but the chief has a good laugh, which I suppose is the main thing.

I get in touch with an ex-student who had done his doctorate in Hong Kong. He takes me home for dinner with his wife and daughter. They live in staff quarters in large scruffy, unpainted apartment blocks. His apartment has two main rooms, other than bathroom and a balcony. One bedroom is for him and his wife, the other room does all the remaining functions: kitchen, living, dining and daughter's bedroom. He considers himself well off, and relatively speaking he is. Appliances are expensive and difficult to obtain in the PRC, so each time he returns from Hong Kong or overseas, he brings an appliance: microwave, or a hi-fi, or video, or TV – and always something for his colleagues. That way his possessions are tolerated. He pays virtually

¹ Stedman, L.C. (1997). International achievement differences: An assessment of a new perspective. *Educational Researcher*, 26(3), 4-15.

no rent, school and health are free, so 90% of his and his wife's incomes go on food and clothes, all of which are very cheap. I begin to understand how things work. Your workplace is your universe, supplying almost everything. The lousy wages of 200 yuan or so a month (\$40 roughly) doesn't mean unliveable poverty as it would in the West.

But this is also a highly efficient system of control. Your job slots you. No job, you might as well not exist. The State employs virtually everyone, which prevents you from moving to another job, another place. It also accounts for the sloppy service in China, instead of unemployment there is, or rather was then, over-employment. As privatisation occurred millions upon millions of the over-employed were suddenly unemployed, creating havoc ...

But back to 1990 and my story. I have been in Beijing for a week and not a word from Professor Xi at Beijing Normal University. I mention this to my student. He makes enquiries, to discover that Professor Xi had been appointed three weeks ago to Macau's University of S.E. Asia.

Macau? I'd come all the way to Beijing to see her, for all she knew, when all the time she was just an hour's jetfoil from Hong Kong! And how come the People's Republic are appointing senior staff at Macau's University when Macau was Portuguese until 1999?

I make myself known at Beijing Normal, after all I'd prepared a talk for them. The Head of Department takes on the responsibility of looking after this strange Long Nose who suddenly appears from nowhere. He books me into a large hotel – at HKU's expense – where Party delegates were housed when they came to Beijing. Not that it is posh, just huge. I have a large suite comprising lounge-room, bedroom and bathroom.

Dr. Fung, who was a colleague of Professor Xi, and a graduate student, Xiao² Tang, are delegated to look after me, who take me to the hotel. Xiao Tang is to be my guide for the rest of the stay. This means she would take me to the dining room for every meal, including breakfast. I feel this is imposing on her hugely; she would have to walk half an hour from her quarters three times a day! After the first day of this, I insist I go on my own. After a struggle, we finally agreed I'd have breakfast alone. It only dawns on me later that, far from being an imposition, this is a real treat for her. Mediocre as the hotel food is, it's far better than that provided in the student quarters.

² *Lit.* 'Little Tang'. Xiao is a diminutive, the equivalent of the Cantonese prename 'Ah', and is usually used by higher status to lower status people. I asked Xiao Tang to drop 'Professor' and call me 'John', but she would only compromise with 'Professor John'. But she was still being formal. In Chinese, the family name comes first, so to her my formal title was Professor John not Professor Biggs.

Dr. Fung is a plain, lumpen woman in her early thirties. When Xiao Tang is out of earshot, Dr. Fung leans towards me. 'I will arrange anything you want.'

'Anything?' They seem to have thought of it all.

'Anything,' she repeats, with a confidential smile.

Ah, got it. That sort of anything.

I hope my face isn't conveying how I am reacting to her proposition.

I go to the dining room for breakfast and other meals if not eating out, the latter usually with Xiao Tang, who clearly enjoys the food. There is no menu; a waitress gracelessly thumps large bowls on the table: vegetable soup, fluffy white buns, a vegetable, one or two meat dishes, one or two extras. Between meals, a rich garlic flavour coats my mouth, very pleasant. I wasn't aware of much garlic in the food at the time.

On Sunday, Xiao Tang and a staff member are deputed to look after me all day. I insist I would be happy to look after myself. The other staff member has a young family and must be mightily



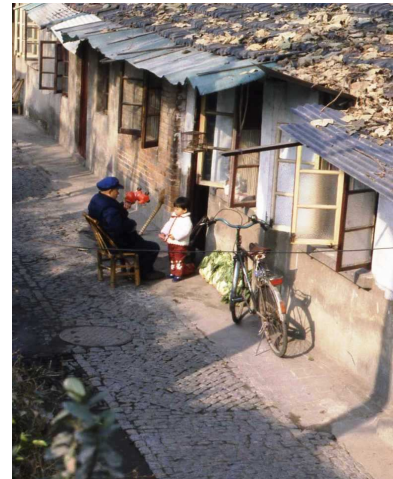
brassed off to have to waste his only free day with this drop-in stranger, but he certainly doesn't give me that impression. While pastoral care of visitors is certainly one side of that coin, I do wonder if visitors are usually escorted to see that they don't see things or get up to things they shouldn't. Possibly not, for they take me to Tiananmen Square, which by now has no trace of the tumultuous goings on a year ago except for some tank tracks gouged into the road. I tentatively mentioned 'what happened last year' in my usual gentle style but received only embarrassed smiles. My guides insist we eat at the recently opened Kentucky Fried Chicken.

They are over thrilled, thinking it very delicious. I don't tell them it is nowhere near as good as Western Kentucky Fried, and rotten value when compared to the Chinese food you can get at the same price. But I guess they are as keen to eat Western as I am to eat Chinese.



On weekdays, I do get more time off on my own. Soon after my solo breakfast, I change into running gear and jog off to sightsee round the nearby streets. I am surprised at the wide, clean streets, flowerbeds lining the kerbs, with provision for good cycleways. One mother runs to keep up with her darlings, while daddy pedals away. I run along the top of a wall and find myself looking down into a *hutong*, where Yeh Yeh is playing with his

grandson, showing him a brightly coloured toy. Unfortunately, many of the *hutongs*, existing for centuries and a unique and loved part of Beijing heritage, have been ploughed into the ground, the inhabitants displaced despite their strong but ineffectual protest. The visitors for the 2008 Olympic Games, it was claimed, would be put off by the untidy spectacle; what *would* they think of our modern Beijing? Anyway, many were in the way for the road widening needed for the Games. The Beijing I saw in 1990, with its wide roads and cycleways and hidden *hutongs*, has given way to a progressive traffic snarl of smog and superhighways.



But it is now my last night in Beijing. Xiao Tang and her boyfriend, a Science graduate student, ask me to go dancing that evening. I tell them I can't dance; I don't mention the poor girl at the Summer Palace reception.

'Come and watch then! You'll love the place. It's where we live, the Minorities' Community Hall.'

The Minorities' Community Hall is huge, with classic pointy gables. Xiao Tang and her boyfriend are Han Chinese from Kunming, Yunnan Province, and not at all like the arrogant Hans we met in Yunnan. Their friends are minorities, either Yi or Bai, who are very good looking with their creamy skin, fine features and large brown eyes.³ They show me their sleeping quarters, six per small room, in tiered bunks.



'Are Hong Kong students' quarters as good as this?' Xiao Tang asks proudly.

It's a different world: I can't possibly tell them how Hong Kong students live. I can only reply: 'Quite similar, but maybe four per room would be more common...'

The rest of the building comprises *four enormous dance floors*, one per storey, each with a massive forties-style big band, à la Glenn Miller, the top floor open to the stars. Presumably the dance floors pay for the student accommodation, the students working as waitresses, barmen and dancing partners. We watch from a balcony and the world rolls back forty years. Most couples are in formal dress, dancing with great skill, slow foxtrot, tango, quickstep, the big band at the

³ See 'In the depths of rural Yunnan', this website.

end of the room all heavy brass, trombones, saxophones, clarinets. My companions want to dance too, so I join them.

Upstairs, on the top floor, I dance a slow foxtrot under the stars: slow, slow, quick-quick, slow. In my arms is a graceful, exquisitely beautiful girl from Yunnan Province, lissom as a sapling, her smiling eyes as luscious as melting chocolate. And we can't exchange a single word.

If only she had Dr. Fung's English – and her generosity!

