

# Standing on the Tail of the Dragon, Snapshots of China in 1972

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**Not valid for North Vietnam** was stamped on my passport. They needn't have bothered. I was going to the People's Republic of China, not North Vietnam.

Our tour group gathered in the Tullamarine Airport lounge. "Don't trust him", said a man with sparkling teeth. Lawyer Jack Lazarus was referring to one of my fellow travellers. "He works for the ATO. Let the Chinese know." This was my first international flight and it was the first and last time I ever spoke to Jack. I was flattered that he had trusted me with this information though because I knew he was an Important Man in the Party. He no doubt knew I was a Party Member.

I had just met our group leader Dave. You would never have known Dave was a builder's labourer because he was a mild-mannered, dapper Englishman. I never got to know him well. I hung out instead with my new comrade Paul who was my age and a Melbourne tram driver like my father-in-law. According to my ASIO file I got married three days before the flight. This trip was going to be our honeymoon, but she pulled out at the last minute and I honeymooned alone.

The 18 members of our group didn't have too much in common. As well as a handful of committed revolutionaries and the ATO spy there was the well-known WA conservationist John Thompson who was very interested in seeing how China preserved its forests and waterways. There was the fearsome women's liberationist Bon Hull. The decorated Tasmanian peace activist Eve Masterman. A young train lover Ron, whose main reason for getting out of bed each morning was to complete another of the world's iconic rail journeys. And a constantly irritable streak of misery. The less said about her the better.

China had only recently opened up to the West. It was just seven months since Nixon visited and 11 months since Whitlam's went there and promised to recognise the PRC when he was elected PM. Our trip was organised by the Australia China Society. Being selected to go was a great honour for a young Maoist like me. ★

When I walked down into the toilets at Manila Airport I was greeted warmly by a Filipino standing next to the hand basin. He offered me soap and a hand towel. What a nice bloke, I thought, before realising he expected a tip. As the plane readied for take-off, I wondered if I could say I had been to the Philippines when I never left the airport.

The islands of Hong Kong glittered like jewels as we circled over them in the dark before touching down on an airstrip on the brink of the ocean. The following day, we had time to look around Kowloon – one of the poorer parts of this distant

colonial outpost. An eyeless beggar squatted on his haunches opposite our hotel, skin stretching tight across hollow eye sockets. Every now and then he rang a bicycle bell attached to the handle of his walking-stick. Most passers-by ignored him, but if ever a coin rattled in his tin, he slipped it inside his jacket. A hunched wild-eyed man with long matted hair shuffled past as if he was late for an appointment. He looked like a holy man.

I hadn't brought a camera with me on the theory that I would remember everything that mattered. I was persuaded however to bring my Dad's Super 8 cine-camera "just in case". It needed film (of course) but fortunately there was a camera store somewhere up in a building near our hotel. I was first in line for the lift on the ground floor. As soon as it emptied, the crowd behind me surged past into it and the door thumped shut in my face. After several similar failed attempts to get in before the lift filled again, I muttered my way back to the hotel without my film.

### ***"Women hold up half the sky", said Mao.***

Bon Hull was one of those women. She marched me straight back down to the store, scattered the locals and dragged me into the lift. "How long does the film go for?" I asked the shop assistant as I caught my breath. "One hour," she said. I figured an hour would be plenty long enough.

My comrade Paul and I took off on foot around Kowloon. People crouched over woks in laneways while Mercedes-Benz taxis crawled past in stalling traffic. Our senses were bombarded by exotic aromas infused with the stench of rotting vegetables and suffocating diesel fumes. Paul and I walked up past an apartment block where we noticed an extension cord dangling from a light socket in the ceiling and powering a little stove on a concrete ledge. We climbed a steep winding dirt path and looked back on mountains of garbage piled high on roof terraces below. Squatters lived on the side of the path. It was hard to tell the difference between the rough structures that housed the squatters and the rough structures that housed their chickens. Plastic sheets were set up so that any rainwater that fell on the tin rooves would run into 44-gallon drums. I didn't feel comfortable filming any of this, and in any case, I hadn't quite got the hang of my Dad's movie camera.

Later that day our bus drove us through a tunnel under the sea. We emerged on Hong Kong Island where everything was shiny and new in a decadent kind of way. ★

On the third day we caught a train across the New Territories to the PRC border. Our excitement rose as we approached the Gateway into the Middle Kingdom. I was anxious to see with my own eyes the fruits of the Chinese people's struggles so eloquently described by Edgar Snow in *Red Star over China*. We were ushered into a reception room which was tranquil and spacious and spotlessly clean. The human face of Socialism took the form of two young porcelain doll-like comrades dressed in black slacks, white shirts and red scarves. They had the poise and grace of ballet dancers.

We were welcomed as foreign dignitaries by our hosts and offered free cigarettes and bottomless pots of green tea. We met the guides who would accompany us on the rest of our trip: interpreters Chac and Chou, and a cadre known as "Horse". Horse had just started to learn English which had just become China's second language. We were asked not to take photographs of bridges, army buildings or people in uniform. After our welcome, I found myself standing behind one of the young comrades waiting to catch a lift. When the lift door opened, she stepped back and resolutely refused to enter before me. So different from capitalist Hong Kong! ★

We boarded the train to Canton and passed mile after mile of neat green fields tended here and there by platoons of peasants. When the train finally shuddered to a stop, our new hosts again welcomed us with the greatest courtesy. Hotel workers carried out traditional southern dishes which were sadly wasted on me, my taste in food having always been plebeian. I routinely ordered English food if it was available, which was usually only at breakfast and then usually only in the form of toast. I gave up on chopsticks after one clumsy attempt to master them, much to the dismay of the streak of misery.

After our evening meal, Paul and I took off into the hot and steamy night. We came upon a gang of workers who were digging a shaft on the side of an unlit, tree-lined street. The workers stopped for a break and invited us into their hut to drink green tea with them. We had no common words, but when I hopped around like a kangaroo, their delight seemed to indicate that they understood we were from Australia. We asked with shrugs and puzzled expressions what they were doing. A cocked hand soared and dipped through the air like a warplane in flight, so we guessed that they were building

an air-raid shelter. Somebody who spoke English appeared out of the night. He was concerned that we might be lost and led us back to our hotel.

Stepping out into the early morning light, I noticed that the streets were already coming to life with a steady trickle of workers funnelling into the city. Men and women alike wore long pants and Mao jackets. I was disappointed that there were no Red Guards to be seen. Instead, a group of elderly Chinese practised a sort of slow-motion *kung fu* in a side street. Further along, a policeman with detachable white sleeves stood on a low tower in the middle of a big roundabout, orchestrating the movements of any vehicles that happened to approach. Spittle along the footpath led inexorably to spittoons at street corners. An old lady determinedly hobbled along on tiny feet which had obviously been bound before the practice was outlawed in the early days of New China. Those who didn't walk rode bicycles, abandoning them in what appeared to be designated areas when they were no longer needed.

The workers at our hotel were engrossed playing badminton in a small courtyard during their break and showed no interest in us.

We were bussed to a commune which had been formed by merging a number of old inefficient Soviet-style collectives. Once again we were greeted with cigarettes and green tea. Peasant representatives put up graphs showing how production had far exceeded targets since control of the commune had been seized from bureaucratic managers who wanted to restore capitalism. We were taken to a shed where soybeans were boiled and made into curd. To the untrained eye this shed could have been mistaken for a sweat shop, but China was pulling itself up by its own bootstraps.

***“We stand for self-reliance”, said Mao. “We hope for foreign aid but cannot be dependent on it; we depend on our own efforts, on the creative power of the whole army and the entire people”.***

Before we left, I was offered a handful of peanuts which I munched into hungrily before realising they were raw. ★

The five-star Peace Hotel in Shanghai had been built by the Sassoons who made their fortune from opium during the reign of Queen Victoria. When I was there, though, you would be more likely to see Madam Mao and her close comrades in this hotel than any British tycoon. Whoever entered the hotel couldn't help but notice its most famous attraction: the bar on the ground floor inside the main entrance, reputedly the longest bar in the world, and probably the most polished. I was still taking in its splendour as I was being shown up to my very own private room with its high ceiling, chunky furniture and chunkier plumbing. Rifling through my case, I discovered that I had inadvertently packed a pair of threadbare underpants. I tossed them into a bin. After toast the next morning, I had time for a short walk. A block or so away I found a street vendor already selling ice-creams out of a cart, so I bought an ice-cream that looked suspiciously like a Paddle Pop.

Our interpreters asked us what we wanted to see. Someone suggested a prison. We were taken instead to Elementary School No 144 (or something like that). By now we were getting used to being treated as distinguished guests. A whole-school assembly took place in our honour. Unlike adults, the children were all brightly dressed. They welcomed us with revolutionary songs. Then a worker representative told us about the great strides that had been taken since the focus of education had shifted away from teaching academic skills to serving the people. I had brought with me a Sherrin football so Paul and I could demonstrate our footy skills, but everyone was escorted back to the bus before we got the chance. As the rest of the group boarded, I booted the ball high and long into an empty sports field, watching it tumble away and finally roll to a stop. The introduction of footy to China would have to wait.

We drove past a martyrs' mound in a park. The mound had been formed when the corpses of Communists massacred by Chiang Kai-shek in 1927 were heaped up and covered with dirt.

***“Thousands upon thousands of martyrs have heroically laid down their lives for the people”, said Mao, “Let us hold their banner high and march ahead along the path crimson with their blood!”***

We visited the old quarters of a residential precinct and met an elderly couple who showed us inside their tidy little wooden home. Their front door opened onto a lovely shaded communal courtyard where they liked to sit. They had no refrigeration, but they seemed happy. They were probably lucky to escape the massacre in 1927, I thought, and then live long enough to experience the dawn of Socialism.

Later that day, I slipped out of our hotel and crossed the road to a promenade that ran alongside the waterfront. I looked back and admired the grandeur of the hotel and the charming colonial skyscape stretching away on either side. Groups of men strolled past me, arm-in-arm, without an apparent care in the world.

I discovered that ping pong diplomacy can be a humbling experience. I admit I had fancied my chances when I stared down the table at my diminutive opponent. I should have known that this smiling assassin was the precocious little champion of the Children's Palace. I won just two or three points in two or three games. It was a time in China's sports history of "***Friendship first, competition second***". All the children who were gathered around remained silent when my opponent won a point but clapped delightedly when I did.

The games at the People's Liberation Army camp were more serious. We watched them from the safe distance of a viewing platform, standing alongside senior officers who were wearing the same uniforms as the soldiers. First we were given an ear-splitting demonstration of unerringly accurate shelling of targets on a distant hill. Then we marvelled at the skill and tenacity of bare-topped muscular men grappling with each other in swift and brutal unarmed combat. Woe betide any imperialist who dared invade China!

**As Mao said. "*This army has an indomitable spirit and is determined to vanquish all enemies and never to yield*".**

That night, fellow traveller Len enticed a young soldier on guard duty to come into the men's dorm. In a gesture of international friendship that could have easily been misconstrued, Len took the soldier by surprise, pulling him down onto a bunk and thrusting a beer at him. The soldier sprang bolt upright and beat a hasty retreat. Later, a few of us were told in confidence that Lin Piao was a renegade and traitor, a disciple of Confucius and a running dog of the US imperialists. He had staged a failed coup against Chairman Mao but died in a plane crash while fleeing to the Soviet Union. (Some time later I learned that Lin had died a whole year before we were told.)

This disturbing news was still on my mind the next day when I walked back down to the ice-cream vendor for another Paddle Pop. Out came one ice-cream, then another, and another. But no Paddle Pop. By now crowd had formed. It was as if they had never seen a handsome white foreigner before. At last, the vendor pulled out a Paddle Pop. I beamed and nodded, and the crowd erupted into spontaneous applause. ★

An even bigger crowd was straining to catch a glimpse of the pandas after we arrived at Peking Zoo. Our guides walked up behind one local after another tapping each on the shoulder. The Red Sea of the Masses parted and we were able walk right up to the front.

Driving past the high walls of the compound where Chairman Mao and Premier Chou En-lai and other senior CPC leaders resided made me grateful that here they were safe from assassination by the KGB or CIA.

The exquisite display of paintings, calligraphy and ceramics in the Forbidden City's Palace Museum revealed in all its glory China's treasure trove of ancient cultural wealth. This was the world's largest palace and its vast grounds contained countless ornamental lakes, bridges, gardens and guest houses with their distinctively curved tile roofs. I registered everything I saw but felt strangely disconnected from it.

Much to my astonishment my threadbare underpants had managed to find their way from Shanghai to Peking, and were waiting silently for me in my room, washed, pressed and folded neatly inside a plastic bag.

Whitlam shook hands with Premier Chou En-lai at the Great Hall of the People. Now we were lining up for a group portrait on its steps under the benign gaze of the Great Helmsman. We had come to celebrate China's National Day. We drifted into the hall mingling with people from all over the world before being scattered around the room. A veteran revolutionary addressed us. He spoke, I was told, about the Long March, the anti-fascist war and China standing up. I think this might have been Chu Teh, but I am not sure.

Sitting across from me was another Long March veteran, a tiny old man in a navy-coloured Mao suit. People took turns to go over and shake his hand and exchange pleasantries. The sumptuous food heaped on our plates was a testimony to the endless bounty that comes about when the means of production are owned by the workers and peasants. There was Peking duck, 100-day egg, a whole fish which staring glibly up at me, and a lot of other delicacies I could not identify. As soon as I finished one course, another appeared on my plate. With parents who grew up in the Depression, I was taught that wasting food is a sin. Finally, however, I just could not eat another morsel.



The next day we broke up into small groups and were taken off to different places. A few of us, including the streak of misery, wanted to see how New China protected religious freedom. We were driven to a medieval temple in an old part of the city. A gigantic hand-carved wooden Buddha dominated the cavernous space inside the temple. This was the biggest wooden Buddha in the world. It was hewn from a single tree and had been carted hundreds of years ago all the way from southern China. The monk sitting in front of us was introduced as Buddhism's Grand Lama, second in rank only to the Dalai Lama. (The Panchen Lama, in case you are wondering, was in jail in 1972.) I was surprised to hear that the Grand Lama only spoke Mongolian. One interpreter translated his Mongolian into Han, and another interpreter translated Han into English. In this fashion, His Holiness assured us that claims about Chinese repression of religion were untrue. I shared with him a friend's story about nuns at her convent school claiming Communists ate babies. The streak of misery, who was seated right behind me, leapt to her feet and cried, "**NO! NO! THAT IS NOT TRUE!**" The Grand Lama didn't seem too bothered, but maybe what was said was lost in translation.

Then as now my musical tastes hadn't progressed past Jimi Hendrix and the Rolling Stones. Having just sat through an epic-length revolutionary ballet – *The Red Detachment of Women* – at Peking's Grand Theatre, I was already restless when a famous opera singer began liberating his most tortured notes. "Who is taller?" I asked my interpreter idly, "The singer or Chairman Mao?" No comparison could be made, came a terse reply.

After a night of revolutionary ballet and opera, I felt off-colour. While the rest of the group visited the Great Wall and the Ming Tombs and flew to the hinterland to visit Chairman Mao's birthplace, I was admitted to hospital. I had bronchial influenza. A team of senior doctors gave me the best of care, treating me with both Western and Chinese medicine. They gave me pills, twitched needles into me and stuck hot cups onto my back. My lungs felt ravaged, and I had to stay there overnight.

Soon after being discharged, I fell into a conversation with a kindly old man on the hospital steps. He introduced himself as Rewi Alley. I knew of him as a Kiwi poet and supporter of the Chinese Revolution. He had lived in China for decades and was regarded as a national hero. He didn't talk much about himself, but he was very interested in my story. We chatted away like old friends, neither of us in any hurry to go.

Moments after Rewi disappeared up the steps, I struck up a conversation with another Westerner, Harry Bethune, who was a Canadian psychologist. Harry's uncle was Norman Bethune – also regarded as a national hero by the Chinese. Norman patched up Republicans during the Spanish Civil War and then patched up Red Army soldiers during the war against Japanese fascism.

***“What kind of spirit is this”, asked Mao, “that makes a foreigner selflessly adopt the cause of the Chinese people's liberation as his own? It is the spirit of internationalism, the spirit of communism, from which every Chinese Communist must learn”.***

I wanted to know what Harry's impressions of China were. “Look at the people's faces”, he responded, “They are all smiling. In the West when you walk down the street, everyone is frowning”.

My fellow travellers hadn't yet returned from Hunan so my minders organised a special trip for me to the Great Wall and Ming Tombs. Four of us, including Horse and a new interpreter, drove off in a black government sedan. On the way Horse tried out his faltering English phrases. As the Wall came into view, I noticed that farmers had cultivated the steep rocky ground right up to its skirting. We joined the throng of visitors and puffed our way up the steep stone pavement. Only the first mile or so had been repaired. Beyond that, the Wall was blocked off but continued to weave and twist around the mountains until disappearing from view. I tried to take in its sheer scale and antiquity. No doubt its construction was one of the most audacious acts of any government ever, but I wasn't sure why the Chin dynasty thought any kind of wall would keep out the Mongols. I wished now that I had brought a camera, but at least I could record the occasion on film.

After a packed lunch, we drove to the Ming Tombs where foreboding stone elephants, lions and horses guarded against thieves and vandals. As China's rich history kept unfolding before me, I pondered over the contradiction between Chinese revolutionaries smashing feudalism and them taking great pride in its achievements.

The next day I was looking forward to visiting a factory. But the “factory” turned out to be a steel works that would have swallowed any Melbourne or Sydney suburb. My personal tour took a couple of hours and was conducted by none other than the plant's director (who spent most of his time in deep conversation with Horse). This steel works represented the adolescent phase of China's industrialisation which had begun with the Great Leap Forward. There were high temperatures and heavy loads and not much mechanisation. From our safe vantage, I could feel the heat from the open furnaces below and look down at the toiling figures of China's labour heroes who were silhouetted in the red glow.

The rest of my group had now returned to Peking and our time in the Socialist Motherland was nearly up. Things got emotional when we bade farewell to our interpreters and our cadre Horse. ★

Back in Hong Kong, it was time to shop. The same eyeless beggar squatted on the footpath opposite our hotel and rang his bell as we rushed past. I stumbled into an oasis of calmness and tranquillity which turned out to be an emporium owned by the PRC. I bought silk scarves for the women in my life, a milky-glass bottle of *mao-tai* for a mate who worked at the local tip, and a clay pipe for myself (for reasons I still don't fully understand because I have never smoked).

After breakfast on our last day, I packed my case and left it in the baggage room behind the front desk while Paul and I stretched our legs one last time.

At the airport I queued up at the money exchange to swap my yuan for American dollars. Once again hovering behind me was the streak of misery. I stepped up to the window and began to fumble through my wallet and jeans pockets for notes and loose change. Apparently I was taking too long because I felt a sudden hard shove in my back and was pushed right out of the line. I was too shocked to say anything.

**As Mao said, “In ordinary circumstances, contradictions among the people are not antagonistic. However, if they are not handled properly, or if we relax our vigilance and lower our guard, antagonism may arise”.★**

Unpacking my luggage back home, I noticed that the clay pipe was missing and the bottle of *mao-t'ai* had broken, its contents leaking over the silk scarves. My threadbare underpants, however, were well-protected inside their plastic bag.

My betrothed and I arranged to have a meal with Bon Hull at Bon's place a few weeks I returned from my honeymoon. When we knocked, there was no answer. We got the night wrong and that was the end of that beautiful friendship. "I went to a lot of trouble to cook that meal", she said when I rang to apologise.

I have had no other contact with anyone else from the tour, except five years later, when I randomly bumped into my comrade Paul in Perth. He was with a girlfriend he had brought back from Venezuela. I haven't heard from him since.

My uncle was a member of a film club and he said he would edit my film. When he finally got around to it, he discovered it only went for four minutes. Before I got back to see him, he was admitted to an aged care home with dementia and died. One of my cousins stripped his house of everything of value to them and threw out everything else, including my four minutes of historic footage. ★