

Beijing Reconstructs, or, Quick, While it's Still China!

Tuesday May 29th.

Within ten minutes of touching down, I had my bags and was in a cab driven by a dour-looking woman who, finally! spoke actual Mandarin. Beijing is no generic Asian city. It is exceedingly geometrical, has been for centuries, with a city plan based on a rectilinear grid and concentric ring roads. Everything outside the second ring road, and they're now up to about six, seems brand new to the naïve visitor, just endless glass towers. We walked around Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City and enjoyed the Ming Dynasty architecture. Add the Ming Tombs and the Temple of Heaven and Beijing is like, all Ming all the time. Now it's entering a drastic new phase of rebuilding, capped by the looming deadline of the Olympics. The rectangles have added a new dimension: up. The courtyards, or "hutong" of old are being plowed under:

My reunion with Mary couldn't have been simpler. She'd arrived the day before and had no problem getting into town, having dinner, and getting a massage, all with zero Mandarin. We talked over her encounter with the local artists, not too different from the one I'd had. Our hotel was in tourist-centered Wanfujing Road, so were destined to be



accosted frequently throughout our stay. But, like in Shanghai, this made for interesting conversations, and never got really annoying. We enjoyed the warm and sunny afternoon exploring the Forbidden City. Highlights included reconstructed palace living quarters, the telecommunications exhibit, and a surprisingly cool and pleasant little Korean restaurant. We walked back to the hotel after talking briefly to a tout who wanted to sell us a tour to the Great Wall. Never trust the first tout, I say; we just took his card. We had overpriced coffee at the stylish "Red Wall" hotel, then walked back to the Tianlun Dynasty to enjoy the pool. After a blissful nap, our new friend Alex came by the hotel to join us for dinner.

Alex is a friend of my friend Bob T. He's a twenty-three year old recent expat who now teaches English in Beijing and is thinking of opening a Mexican restaurant sometime. He is passionate about martial arts, and he's deeply curious and engaged my many other aspects of life in Beijing. He's an Asian studies graduate, dead fluent in Puthonghua, and

knowledgeable about local history and politics. He “ran” to China, not from something else, like some expats are known to do. We all went off to a hot pot restaurant and chattered volubly about history and politics and expat life. After dinner we went out into the warm night and shared a tobacco and hash joint before hailing a cab. Grim Communist repression seemed far away. However, when the cops bust raves the foreigners are usually released and the locals are drug-tested and jailed if found positive. We went on to meet a couple friends of his at a big loud nightclub called “Babyface”, somewhere in the Sanlitun entertainment area. We joined a dozen or so people in a side room with a separate sound system and a karaoke machine. It’s customary to rent a party room for the evening, and host all your friends. We were under some obligation to consume drinks to show appreciation. I cheerfully bore this burden as we watched a woman do a LA-style hiphop dance route. Turns out that she’s a friend of Alex’s. She managed to sign away her U.S. citizenship rather than go through the hassles of renewing her Chinese residence permit. Her professors don’t like her, she claims, because she doesn’t come to class. Ah, youth.

Wednesday, May 30th. Dancing With Busses.

We rented bicycles and set off to explore Beijing traffic and incidentally see more sights. We rode west, side by side in the bike line of Chang An (“Long Boulevard”); I videoed Mary with Tiananmen in the background. There are four or five lanes of vehicular traffic, in each direction, roaring down the middle carriageways at 60 km/h or so, but we stayed in the calm refuge to the side with cyclists, pushcarts, pedestrians, cripples, and busses, all moving to their own agenda, obeying distinct sets of rules but not colliding. If everyone stays under 30 km/h or so, formal traffic rules are superfluous. A rather gelatinous peace is the order of the day. After going west for a couple major intersections we came to the Minzu Hotel. This is a 1950’s “modern” edifice with a gorgeous stone lobby and intimidating-looking staff clad in the national dress of various national minorities. Luxury, Communist-style can still be had in Beijing. We soon turned south and passed through an area of multi-story, but decidedly un-glossy reinforced-concrete apartments. There were typical ground-floor shops, alternately food stores, clothing stands, or scooter repair facilities with assorted parts and vehicles strewn the sidewalk. I had the urge to stop at a tiny 2-yuan noodle stand, but it was not to be. Our destination: Ox Street Mosque, an unremarkable set of Ming-style courtyards. Mary felt she was probably not properly attired, so only I went inside. She was harassed by child beggars, including an eight-year old girl who kept grabbing at her. The mosque was a gathering place for national minorities from the West, a place for some very ragged unhealthy poor people to seek alms. I emerged soon enough.



We were greeted by Hamid, a stocky young man who spoke very good English. He wanted to know if either of us were journalists, since he wanted coverage for a protest then happening at the West station. He lost interest in us once it was clear that all we could offer was video presence on Youtube. His conversation was intriguingly vague. He was on his way home to the west, after “visiting friends” in Dalian. Unlike every other street encounter, he was the one to politely end the conversation, not us. Too much time on his hands for business guy, too posh for a pilgrim, this man was as close to Al-Qaeda as I was gonna get.

We traversed the rest of the Muslim quarter, on our way to the Temple of Heaven, as the sky grew dark and the first drops of thunderstorm began to fall. We quickly sought refuge in a dumpling restaurant and had a very authentic and very bland Beijing lunch for very little money. The rain retreated and we explored the endless rectilinear gardens of the Temple of Heaven but didn't enter the key buildings as they required additional tickets.

The ride back to Wanfujing was most educational. We passed some older hutong neighborhoods, and then a much larger area which was being demolished, with a few shells of buildings and traces of streets visible through gates in a 5 meter high wall covered with cheery Olympic posters and real estate ads. This was the wavefront of Beijing development. China disappears, China reconstructs. Yes, I know that “China Reconstructs” was a Mao-era English language propaganda magazine. I've found bloggers that use this as a pun on the current cycle of breakneck building and re-building. That evening we went to a yoga class, which was held on the 32nd floor of the Soho apartment complex, and went to bed relatively early.

Thursday, May 31st, the Checklist.

Silk Alley, check, art zone, check, salsa, check, Peking duck, yep. Thursday was cool and rainy, a good day for indoor activity. We got a cab to “Silk Alley”, a multi-story, city-block-long mall. This mandatory tourist stop is notorious for freewheeling badgering, er, bargaining, for uninteresting goods of uncertain provenance. This is less

fun than its sounds. There can sometimes be cheery banter, but more often the bargaining there is merely a chore. Our first encounter was at an underwear stand, where the opening price for five pairs of generic socks was 150 dollars, US. I shoved the socks back at the seller and walked away. We explored several aisles of fabrics, sports clothes, tailor shops, costume jewelry, and more. Then we managed to buy some tea at an almost tolerable price but started to get lost in a discussion of a 'bargain deal' on a kite that neither of us wanted. Politeness doesn't help here. "Hello .. hello .. hello," chirps every proprietor from every stall. Some grab your arms, but don't prevent you from walking. After the first couple dozen yellow-uniformed greeters, "Hello," starts to sound like birds chirping, "Hello," it's only water flowing. "Hello," don't mistake this for human contact.

We dashed through the rain across the street for a look at the nearest upscale mall. This was filled with floodlit floor to ceiling posters and pulsing escalators, but only a couple of cosmetics counters were actually open. Outside, it was starting to rain again, and back we went to Silk Alley to buy raincoats. This time, we were not distracted socializing during the bargaining. We just named a low price and stuck to it, mindlessly repeating the offer, or coming up maybe a tiny increment if the other party looked bored instead of fake-angry. We donned our purchases and got a cab out to Dishanzi, also known as 798, the somewhat self-conscious arts district build in a converted factory complex from the 1950's.



When we got back to Wanfujing, Mary took a nap while I took some clothes to cleaners and bought some prescription meds. Then we went downstairs to get a cab to go to Latino's salsa club. Once again, I found myself giving directions to a confused cab driver in a city I hadn't been to before, with the added thrill of not knowing the language. The club was beautiful, and empty. The promised 8 pm lesson showed

no signs of starting, but the manager called the teacher up, and by 9 we'd downed our first mojito and were being put through our paces, first with four other people, but soon enough with a dozen or so. After the dance lesson, we dashed down the block, to where we'd pre-ordered a Peking duck dinner, and enjoyed our fanciest meal in Beijing. Then, back to the club where we indeed danced salsa in Beijing for little while. Right-hand turn, hair-brush, cross-body lead. Aside from the band, I think we were the only non-Chinese, and many of the dancers were very good. Not flashily dressed or gym-toned necessarily, but as good dancers as we'd see in a club in the Bay Area on a weeknight. Salsa in Beijing, how cool is that?

June 1st, Finding
Tiger Mountain.

We indeed wound up calling the first tout we spoke to, and booked a van tour to the Great Wall, Ming Tombs and unspecified shopping destinations. An early van pickup turned



into an endless crawl through morning traffic to a suburban hotel to pick up our other passengers: an Iowa grandmother and granddaughter, who was named Nora actually. Then came an hour's drive to the "Jade Factory"; a largish shopping hell devoted to sculpture and jewelry at all price ranges. This is not was not as bad as it sounds, since Layla, our guide, was personable and knowledgeable and didn't try to make us buy anything. Another short drive brought us to the Great Wall at Badaling, the most developed visitors' site, and the closest to Beijing. As our photos suggest, the main feature of this part of the Wall is pedestrian traffic congestion. The wall runs right up a hillside, and many visitors are the limits of their athletic capacity just rumbling off the bus. Slow, infirm, or just plain confused, the first few hundred yards atop the Wall are a polyglot human obstacle course. We had only 90 minutes, and it took perhaps 35 minutes to get clear of the crowds. The views were limited since the day was gray and misty. Some folks would be disappointed to find that this part of the Wall is reconstructed and dates back no further than 1978. But the entire experience was actually fun. It was gratifying that the majority of visitors are at least Chinese. This was an archaeological expedition so much as an anthropological one. We returned to the bus, thighs taut from the steep downhill walk. And soon, the Ming Tombs. The Ming Tombs are set in a large park and we only had time for the main couple of buildings. A helpful sign pointed to a view of Tiger Mountain. Tiger Mountain at last! Could this be Eno's impression of the fictitious Tiger Mountain? Put that way, how could it not be? Even better, the view in that direction was completely obscured by clouds. Our guide Layla indulged me by posing with Mary and Nora, pointing towards the hypothetical mountain.



In fact, she even sent us a photo of the real mountain, which she took a few days after our return. What a sublime counterpoint to the mundane shopping interludes that punctuated the day. Ahead of us remained the teahouse whose charming and wholesome server could not convince us to buy any overpriced teas, and the “silk factory” where we bought a new bedspread despite the crude and obnoxious salesfolk. The van driver kindly dropped us at the subway, saving all concerned an hour of late afternoon rush hour traffic. But our day was not even half over.

We had about an hour at the hotel to nap and change, then we went off to Alex’s place for dinner. Again the cab driver had local storytelling on the radio. A twangy voice bobbed up and down on a current of unknown emotions, teasing me with an occasional noun or particle that I could recognize. We’d had the driver talk to our host on my phone, so there was no doubt about where we were going: an apartment block in the middle class east-side Chaoyang district. After some boulevards fringed with neon signs in Korean, and avenues dotted with Russian ads, we arrived at the final tower end of a long alley, disembarked, and called Alex. He’d be right down. But 15 minutes later he had not come down. Where were we? Another call, and another, and finally we put a friendly passerby on the phone with him: we were one block over. Our neighborly stranger and her grown son walked us out the alley and into the next one to meet Alex. He took us upstairs to the 80 square meter apartment he was sharing with a largely absent roommate for about 150 USD per month. We had some wine, and another foul Xinjiang joint, and several fine dishes he and a friend prepared. Round midnight, we started to head out to a club. Which turned into another, and another. One o’clock became 3, which turned into a half an hour hanging around outside before we fell into a cab, then into bed, at four.



Saturday June 2, Last Call for Footwork.

We rose, not ill but tired, in time to make last call at the multi-asian breakfast buffet. Bok choy and dumplings, the Financial Times. Diet of champions. Back to bed, in my case only briefly. I went down the side street looking for a foot massage to relieve my slight headache. I entered a

typical rundown living-room-with-recliners, looked around for a second, and tall woman in a black T-shirt came in. I negotiated for a half-length session for half the normal price, partly since I didn't want to leave Mary for too long but also just for language practice. I just sipped my lukewarm bottle of green tea and made conversation in Mandarin. I went back up to the room, and after an hour of checking email and fussing with our belongings, led Mary down to the foot place for her treatment. Meanwhile, I hung out in the nearby park, talking to a shy divorced dad and his equally shy three-year-old son.

The rest of the afternoon passed quickly, and soon it was time for one last mandatory tourist experience: Beijing Opera. Our cab found the general neighborhood but not the theater "Xiyuan Youth Center" for the performance. Two or three restaurant doormen and another overconfident cab couldn't find it either. Finally a guard waved us into a city park with a theater in the middle. There were a couple busses parked outside, but for a large building it was fairly empty. And now we know why, only busloads of clueless foreigners would ever go see this stilted clangorous relic of an art form. Only the poorly translated super-titles provide a shred of amusement. Beijingers certainly don't go to this stuff.

Our final hours of tourism were spent in Houhai, "Behind the lake" is a quiet park studded with tasteful and discreet restaurants. We found the place that Alex had recommended to us, and enjoyed a somewhat random selection of exquisite North Chinese dishes. Alex and friend rendezvoused with us for a final drink at a lakeside teahouse, where tea was twenty bucks, but beer was reasonable. Given the previous rough night, we called it an evening by around 1 am. Packing, breakfast, airport cab, inter-terminal shopping frenzy all unrolled smoothly and we were in melatonin dreamland by the time our 747 was over Korea.