

Between two capitals: Xian and Beijing

In its long history, China had many capitals. Xian served as the capital during the Han dynasty (late BCs -- early ADs) and then again for almost 400 years in medieval times serving four other one-syllable dynasties. Beijing was also a capital on and off, starting somewhere in the 12th century (the Jin dynasty, if you must know).

Xian is a very pleasant city. Like Jerusalem, it has a magnificent wall that surrounds the old city, and in it you may find the Muslim quarter. As pleasant and beautiful and happening as it may be, Xian is visited by scores of tourists chiefly because of the historic sites near it, the first and foremost of which is the famous army of Terracotta warriors. In 1974, while digging a well, peasants found what turned out to be one of the greatest archeological discoveries of the 20th century - underground vaults that stored thousands of life-size terracotta warriors, with horses and chariots. As I believe you all saw pictures of those 2000-year old soldiers, I can only say one thing. The Chinese embassy in Tel Aviv has one of those soldiers on display. When I saw it I thought to myself that I only needed to close my eyes and multiply that single soldier in my head in order to save the trip to Xian. Not. The thousands of soldiers differ from each other by rank, cloths, face and posture. And each sculpture is very detailed and a remarkable piece of art. Splendid.

Beijing - the mother of all Chinatowns - is the northern (bei) capital (jing). Nanjing, near Shanghai, is the southern (nan) capital. Standing by a hotel reception desk in front of a clock that showed the time in Tokyo, I had the time to examine the Chinese writing of "Tokyo". It said Dongjing, i.e., the eastern capital. What is the western capital, you ask? No, it's not Jerusalem. James thinks that it might stand for an imaginary place.

Beijing is lovely and lively. On the way downtown from the airport we were greeted by a sign that counted down the seconds until the Olympic torch will be lit in 2008. The city undergoes a serious facelift towards that awaited event and I guess that it looks quite different from what it looked like 5 or 10 years ago. But the basic highlights look probably the same:

- The Forbidden City (they were not kidding when they called it a "city"),
- The Summer Palace (the summer playground of the imperial court),
- The Temple of Heaven (a superb park with several beautiful temples, at the heart of Beijing),
- Tiananmen (Gate of Heavenly Peace: the huge gate that stands between Tiananmen square and the forbidden city, from which Mao proclaimed the People's Republic in 1949, from which he reviewed many military parades and from which he still watches his people through his enormous portrait that hangs there between the red flags)
- and the famous Tiananmen square (that, like everything else in Beijing, conveys a sense of profound faith in the principle of "size matters").

Another essential touristy stop is of-course The Great Wall. There are several sites around Beijing where parts of this long wall were restored and ready to accept visitors. My tip: go to one of the further sites that are quieter and more peaceful, and if you see a sign "do not pass", please do pass! This way, you may enjoy less familiar views of the

wall. Don't forget to bring a book and some fruits and snacks. It is quite fun to sit on the great wall, in a fine sunny day, to dangle the feet off the wall, read a book, eat banana, listen to a crow calling far away in the distance, look at the wall and think about the words that Richard Nixon said when he visited the wall in 1972 ("It sure is a great wall").

Apart from these essentials, Beijing is a great metropolitan that invites its visitors for long walks through fancy shopping streets, great markets and little picturesque old neighborhoods that are called "hutongs" (think of the little narrow streets of Hatikva neighborhood in Tel Aviv, minus Hatikvanians and cars plus Chinese and bikes, and you get a first order approximation of a hutong).

But the greatest time I had in Beijing is when I had close encounters with its inhabitants. Let me tell you of three such encounters, each one having its own title.

A Greek man in Beijing

I was walking through a street market in Beijing, when I saw a beautiful bronze bird on a little stand. I stopped to examine it. The woman and I started bargaining (200-40-180-50-160-60-120-70-100-70-80-70-80-70-80-70-70). Despite the fact that the lady "lost" 130 Yuan on the bird, she was very happy with the deal, what made me realize that the starting point of bargains should be 1/10 and not 1/5 of the asked price. Anyway, while wrapping the bird for me she asked me where I was from. Naturally, I said "Greece" (As George from Seinfeld said "It is not a lie, if you believe it"). Her response was "???". Repeating the name few times, and even louder, didn't help. I started throwing words like "Athens, Atuna, Acropolis, Buzuki" etc. Nada! More vendors began to gather around us trying to help. I sketched a little map showing Italy, which they knew, and Greece next to it. Didn't take. I tried "Zorba, sirtaki" and even sirtakied a little bit like Anthony Quinn. Gurnischt! The lady then asked me "small?". I said that indeed my country was small. So they all said "Ahha!", namely, "you didn't really expect us to know all small countries of the world". And then I had an idea: I wrote the number 2008 and said "Beijing, Olympic". They all straightened their backs and put on their proudest face, as though I mentioned their 12-year old kid who just graduated from Harvard Law School. I let them enjoy that moment for few seconds before throwing them back into the harsh reality by writing 2004 and saying "Greece". Again, nothing. At this point I decided to pay and go, and the woman said to me sadly "sorry, sorry". I went on and entered a near-by store. The woman there said to me "Hello, where are you from?". Without raising my eyes to her I muttered indifferently "Greece". I then heard her saying "Oh, Greece, the first Olympics"! Amazed and excited I said "Yes! Yes!! How do you say that in Chinese?". She answered: "Sila". I said "shei-shei" (thanks) and ran back to the lady in the street who was very happy to see me again. I told her "Sila". She remained puzzled. But I didn't give up. I knew that each syllable in Chinese has 4 different tones (so "Sila" has 16 different pronunciations). I began saying "Sila" in various pronunciations until, in the 5th time, success was registered. She called her friends from the near-by stands to let them know that I'm from "Sila". I'm telling you, there was no prouder Greek that day in China!

An Englishman in Beijing

On our last night in Beijing, we went to dinner with a young Chinese couple that we met on the flight from Xian. They offered to go to eat at their university. When we got there, we reached a place called "The English Corner". That is the main square of the campus where students gather at night and look for English speakers with whom they can practice their English. Stepping into that square while speaking English with Melody, my young companion, I felt like a blood drop feels when it falls into a tank of sharks. Within seconds I was surrounded by something like 20 students who almost crushed poor Melody that was pushed aside. They wanted to hear me speak about everything. You know how Andy Warhol said that every person deserves 15 minutes of fame? So my share that night was 2 hours of fame that were only interrupted by James who had to drag me from there at 10:40PM, to the protest of the Chinese students, reminding me that we still didn't have dinner. In the first half hour they determined the subjects of conversation by shooting at me question after question. We talked about my trip, about the things I saw in their country, about Chinese food, about English teaching in China, about the education system in China, and also about Israel and how is it to live in the desert among such smart and potent people that invented the tank "Mekawa"... I answered all of their questions and, when it came to Chinese food and to their level of English, I was brutally honest. Their English was broken and lame. But they were extremely eager to improve it and it was heart-warming to hear them speaking slowly, measuring every syllable so carefully because of their fear of making mistakes. It turns out that their English is poor because they study it like we study Arabic in high school - like a written language and not like a spoken language. I also met two days earlier an English teacher and his bad English also shed some light on the matter. But the most interesting parts of the conversation were the ones in which I took charge and became the driver: pointing to the huge statue of Mao that stood just next to us, I asked them what they thought of that man. Like other Chinese people with whom I had spoken before, they also saw him as a great man that, for some reason, bad things happened during his years as the leader. I was quite relentless and demanded to know how they accept in their university a statue of a man that closed universities and that killed free thinking as well as millions of people who dared to think. The answer of one of them (the others became mute) was "It was other people who did those crimes because they interpreted his ideas in a wrong way". Terrific answer! At this point I felt that perhaps my provocative questions are somewhat problematic, so I decided to take it easy and move on to less risky subjects. "So....", I said with my most melting smile, "what human rights are still in need of improvement in today's China?"... Strangely, they were more comfortable dealing with current issues, than they were when we dealt with the memory of a man who died 27 years ago. Free access to information was their main concern. In general, they all agreed that things improved immensely since 1989 (Tiananmen square), that China has still a long way to go when it comes to openness, democracy and human rights, and that the time is still not ripe for democracy in China. They all agreed that economics is now the first concern, education is number two on the list, and only after the major problems in those two issues will be addressed, it would be possible to consider a gradual transition to a democratic regime.

An Israeli in Beijing

One morning, we woke up early and headed south towards the beautiful Temple of Heaven. It was there that I decided that I actually like those Chinese; it's not a love story, but they are more OK than what it may seem at first. What do I mean? The Chinese people make special efforts to alienate visitors in their country. It's their loudness, their offensive conduct, the way that they drive (like James Bond, i.e., licensed to kill), the way that they don't see you when you stand in line and even push you, their really-really-different food (to which I could dedicate a whole book that would include less polite adjectives) and the exceptionally difficult communication barrier. Traveling in China is not easy and many travelers come back with a bad opinion on the Chinese. However, after some time I realized that all those seemingly offensive things actually reflect a great zest and gusto for life. They drive like crazy and they rush to the head of the line and they speak loudly and they eat everything that moves partially because they do everything with passion. I know that it may sound a somewhat superficial observation, but after 5 weeks there I feel pretty confident about this conclusion. And that morning in the park supplied to me the QED to the proof of my social statement. Thousands of old people went out to the park to enjoy Tai-chi, gym practicing, all sorts of dancing (from tango to martial-kind-of dancing with swords), all possible variations on badminton and ping-pong games, ma-jong, chess, walking backwards (yes, backwards, as though they want to become young again), flying kites, playing ball and what not. Walking there enchanted, I heard from afar singing. Like a seaman lured by the singing of the siren, I followed the music until I found something like 150 people standing in a circle and singing! In the center, there was a fat Saraleh Sharon (a lady singing leader) that chose the songs and directed the people to the proper page in their song notebook. Each song ended with a call "How" (rhymes with "No") which means "good". I stayed there alone for almost an hour, fascinated by a phenomenon (singing in public) that exists also in Israel but we like to mock it! I then continued to wander in the park and saw people who stood alone among the trees and practiced Tai-Chi or played a game with a rope and a gyroscope-thing or danced alone! It then hit me that what I witnessed is a rite. This entire festival, that takes place every morning in all of the green areas in Beijing and elsewhere, is a rite of life, a celebration of life! That was a wonderful final accord to my trip that left me elated.

I am back in Israel, since last week. Here, regretfully, if someone would be seen dancing alone between the trees of a park, he would be diagnosed as being "scratched in the head". I began working full time and this whole trip already looks like a sweet memory from far away days in the past.

Farewell, Lehitraot ,

Tamir