

25.3 - China in 1978: Stranger in a Strange Land

In November 1978, I flew to Osaka, Japan. After a short, disorienting visit to that garish, highly commercialized city, where I asked why every bathhouse had a sign saying, “no tattoos,” especially since I saw no tattoos, anywhere. I was told that only Yakuza gangsters had tattoos and the tattoos were normally concealed under clothing. So it was really a “no gangsters” sign. I told him that in my country, tattoos were the domain of bikers and sailors, but that no one would put out a sign like that.

When the body graffiti fad took off in the 1990s, I was repelled, mostly because I find tattoos disfiguring and distracting. As of 2025, the craze seems to be peaking as celebrities and influencers are now getting expensive laser treatments to get rid of the semi-permanent fashion statements.

I took the bullet train to Tokyo. A Japanese English teacher named Setsuko befriended me and we talked for almost three hours. When we reached Tokyo she invited me to go past Tokyo to her hometown for dinner. When we got there she phoned her parents to tell them she was bringing me and they told her to immediately send me back to Tokyo. Setsuko was extremely apologetic and insisted, against my multiple protestations, on riding with me back to Tokyo. We said our goodbyes. I found a hotel nearby, the Green Hotel, and 45 minutes later I was surprised to get a call in my tiny room. It was Setsuko. She had gone home, and then came back to find me. I waited, but she never showed up. Six months later when I checked my mail at my mother’s house in Texas there was a letter and a package from her. She wrote that the reason she acted so strangely was that she was ashamed to admit that she was a divorced woman. The package contained fine art papers, which I put to good use. I wrote to her that she had nothing to be ashamed of, and I was a divorced person myself, and I was sorry that being divorced was something to be ashamed about in her country. “Hold your head high,” I wrote. “It’s your life to live, and let others live with their own judgements.”

I never heard from her again.

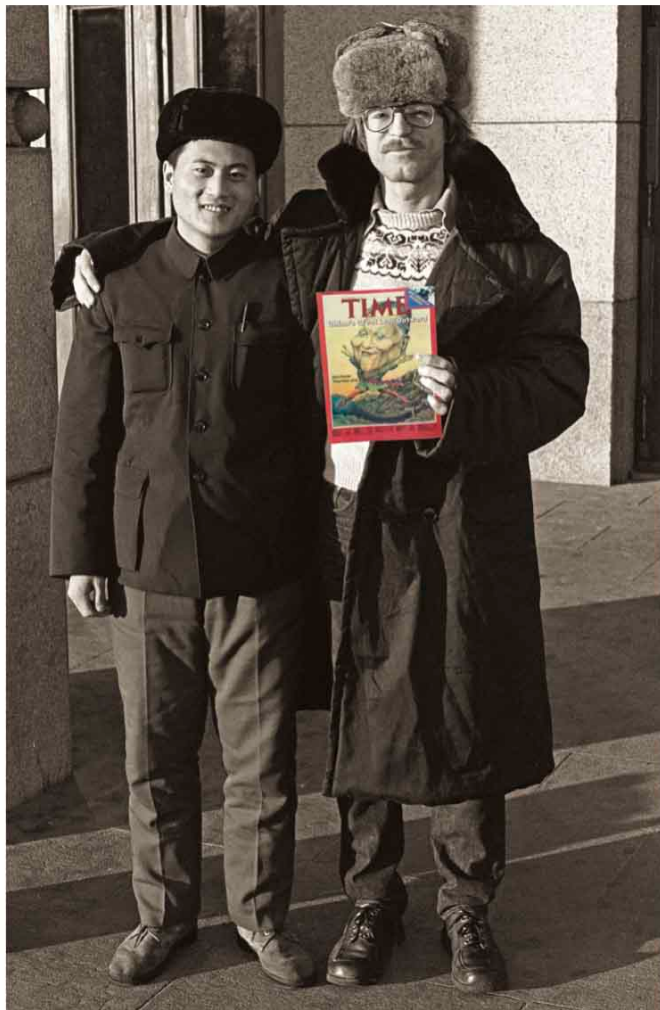
The next day, I joined up at the Imperial Hotel with a group of Americans to embark on an official study tour of Communist China. We toured Tokyo for several days before taking a flight to Beijing on December first.

Deng Xiaoping would soon become China's "paramount leader." Deng had already been the de facto figure in the new, more pragmatic era that emerged after Chairman Mao's death and the purge of the "Gang of Four" in late 1976. "It doesn't matter whether it's a white cat or a black," Deng would said, repeating an old saying, "a cat that catches mice is a good cat."

The Soviet model of industrialization had failed to deliver prosperity to China and the two countries began to diverge on their interpretation of communist dogma as well as Russia's moves toward detente with the West. The Sino-Soviet split culminated

in 1969 during a border skirmish when the Soviet Union considered a nuclear strike on China. The United States warned the Soviet Union against starting WWIII, which slightly softened China's anti-American posture. This paved the way for the Nixon and Kissinger visit to China in 1972, and the establishment of full diplomatic relations in 1979.

The Asian edition of *TIME* on November 27, 1978 had a picture of Deng leaping over the Great Wall with the title: "The Great Leap Outward." I carried this magazine with me during my China trip and showed it around to the Chinese, some of whom would turn away, having been taught to not look at foreign propaganda.



Ch.25. With our guide, and *Time* cover showing Deng Xiaoping



Ch.25. A man, wearing an ear flap hat, in the midst of fellow Manchurians, all marveling at the stranger in their midst. 1978.

Deng and his pragmatists had recently gained an absolute majority by winning the support of some of the Cultural Revolution forces and neutral groups. Posters were allowed to remain up on the “Democracy Wall” in Beijing’s Xidan Street, and thousands of Chinese had taken to the streets to demand more rights, including democracy. In a spirit of radical pragmatism, citizens were being encouraged by the Communist Party leaders to seek justice for the “Gang of Four,” which even included Mao’s widow.

Our group of fifty Americans was one of the first groups of tourists to take advantage of this new accessibility. Public reaction and excitement over this change in China’s attitude was at its height during the first week of our tour when China and the United States jointly announced at that time they were going to open diplomatic channels and normalize their relationship. We were feeling very lucky to get there before Coca Cola, McDonald’s, or even Kentucky Fried Chicken. It was also that first week in December that a wall poster titled “The Fifth Modernization” was put up on the Democracy Wall and signed by Wei Jingsheng. In his manifesto, Wei wrote that freedom was the most important modernization, even more important than raising the standard of living. Deng’s Four Modernizations were industry, agriculture, science and technology, and national defense. But during those days of our visit, we were electrified by the hope that democracy might soon be coming to China, and that it would join the rules-based international order.

Our first view of Beijing was from the air on December 1st. It lay, nearly obscured, under a dome of dusty smog. The bus ride into the city was on the “longest and widest boulevard in China” where everything appeared to us through the haze. The sky, the road, the bare ground and the meticulously cultivated rows of barren trees were all the color of sand.

It was rush hour, but there was scarcely any vehicular traffic heading in or out of this city of eight million people. But everything came to life when we reached the center of town. The pragmatic Deng had declared that every household should have a bicycle and, indeed, it seemed they did. By contrast, his predecessor, Mao Zedong, had ended private farming and ordered that simple clay furnaces be built in backyards to smelt metal as part of the Great Leap Forward. These furnaces were useless, and food production fell by half. The economic and political campaign of industrialization led to genocide and caused the Great Chinese Famine. Around 30 million Chinese starved to death between 1959 and 1961.

The sidewalks were thick with pedestrians and the streets were filled with thousands of cyclists all riding the same single-speed, Flying Pigeon bicycle. Like the first Model T's, all of them were black, except for the white fender tip that functioned as a reflector. I was told there was not a single private automobile in the entire country. It was a strange, but very pleasant experience to be in a crowded city streets with only cyclists and pedestrians. Only occasionally would a boxy, “Red Flag” Russian Zil style sedan pass through, chauffeuring Communist Party officials.

Many of the Chinese wore face masks to protect against the particulates from the coal burned in countless homes for heat and cooking. The coal smoke, combined with the



Ch. 25. The forbidding Forbidden City, Beijing, 1978



Disney balloons and Polaroids were a big hit.



Schoolgirls performed under watchful eyes

exhaust from unregulated factory smokestacks and the dust from the semi-arid countryside, conspired to create a tubercular shroud over every city we visited. As a result, all but one of our group would come down with a respiratory ailment during our visit. I was not the exception.

This tour was even more closely supervised than the Soviet tour. However, there were a few opportunities to slip away to walk the streets, only because we were among the first Westerners to be let in. The cold mornings in Beijing were exhilaratingly surreal. The thick haze gave a dream-like appearance to the buildings—especially the Forbidden City. The Chinese workers were bundled in the same blue or green cotton coats and padded green trousers. Androgynous and numberless people, most wearing a green cap with a red star, materialized out of the haze to exchange stares before disappearing again.

This urban landscape was periodically interspersed with small enthusiastic groups of smiling workers having their pictures taken by equally excited members of our group who thought to bring Polaroid cameras as well as gewgaws like Disney

balloons and small toys. It was hard to tell who was more charmed—the dazzled Chinese watching the pictures spring from the camera with an odd whirring sound, or the Americans excited over the opportunity to introduce these marvels to the local yodels.

It was arranged for us to feast three times a day at lavish banquets that threatened to leave us time for little else. Yet somehow we managed to visit museums and schools of every kind, as well as hospitals, farms, factories and various institutions. We visited a ginseng farm and it was explained how the ginseng root that looked most like a human form were the most highly prized. Plants that resembled parts of the human anatomy or certain organs were believed to be good for the corresponding part. In line with this theory, countless deer are raised in order to harvest their antlers each spring, which are then cut into slices as a male aphrodisiac.

We toured the Great Wall and the cities of Beijing, Changchun, Jilin, and Guangzhou in an exhausting two-week period. (I spent another two weeks in Hong Kong by myself). The authorities who saw to our needs were overwhelmingly polite and gracious. They apologized constantly for their shortcomings and backwardness. To my mortification, one or two members of our troupe saw this as an opportunity to launch into soliloquies on the differences between the American and Chinese systems, with emphasis on American superiority.

In Changchun, the capital and largest city in Jilin province (one of three provinces in Manchuria), we were treated to a musical play staged at the Peking Opera, *Where the Silence Is: Incident at Tiananmen Square*. It told the story of how the government tried to prevent the public mourning of Zhou Enlai in 1976. This act led to an uprising that was labeled by the prevailing Gang of Four as a “counter-revolutionary action.” After the Gang of Four was ousted, the government decided to bless the incident as being in line with revolutionary ideals.

We were given the best seats in the house, in front of the orchestra pit where the musicians were warming up. Before the production began, our guide explained that plays are a popular and inexpensive form of entertainment. “It only cost three cents!”

Even with the average monthly wage being around thirty dollars, it was still a bargain. The communist party got the best deal because it meant people were paying for their own indoctrination. As the play was beginning, I glanced over my shoulder at the sea of attentive and reverential Chinese faces. Nearly everyone was wearing their green hat with the red star.

A melodramatic plot concerned two lovers who were reunited after having been separated for ten years. Because the man had been an intellectual during the Cultural Revolution, he had been forced to do manual labor on a rural commune in a remote province. He was allowed to return home only after the ousting of the Gang of Four. The collective heart of the audience soared as the two, long-lost lovers saw each other across a room. The pain of ten years of separation showed as wrinkles on their faces, grey hairs at their temples and tears in their eyes. The lovers stretched out their arms and raced to one another as the music soared to a climax. Finally the couple met in the middle of the stage and....shook hands. All us Americans spontaneously burst into laughter. After we brought ourselves under control, a New Yorker whispered loud enough for us to hear, "What? No hugs, no kisses?"

But for the Chinese in the audience, this was a serious and tender moment and none of them were laughing. After the play, while barely containing myself, I tried to explain the outburst to our guide: "Well, you see, after all those years apart, they only shook hands."

He smiled broadly while nodding his head up and down, "Yes, yes! They very much in love!"

While we were talking about the play afterwards, one man in our group solemnly warned us not to get romantically involved with the Chinese, because the penalty for foreigners sleeping with a Chinese man or woman is five years in prison. I asked one of our guides about this, and also about the official policy on pre-marital sexual relations between Chinese. She consulted with her older female supervisor in order to supply official answers to my questions. I was told such behavior was not allowed in China. "What happens to someone engaging in this forbidden activity?" I asked.

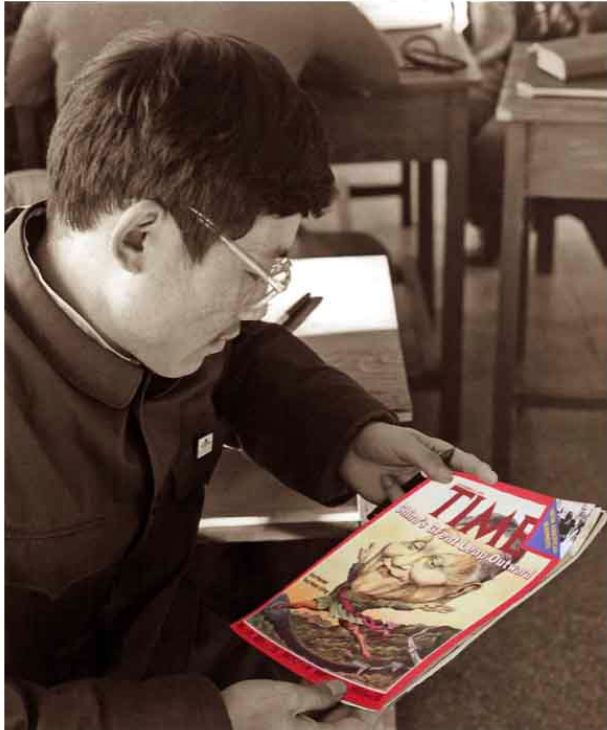
Again she consulted. "We make them stop," she said.

“What happens if they don’t stop?”

Another consultation followed. The supervisor was getting irritated. The guide was blushing when she reported, “We put man and woman in different cities.”

“Ok, then what if the man gets on his Flying Pigeon bicycle and goes to the other city to make love to his girlfriend?”

Without bothering to consult the supervisor the woman said, “We put in jail!”



Ch.25. Jilin University student with Time Magazine

In Changchun we visited Jilin University. Each of us got paired with a student who was studying English. My student was a twenty-three year old named Kao Chich-Kuo. He wanted to become a movie star, but said that he would probably be a translator like most of the other English majors. Kao’s father had been a party minister, but was denounced during the cultural revolution as a “capitalist roader.” For a year, during that period, Kao could not go to school and, leaning forward, he admitted that in his whole life he had never even kissed a girl. “But dancing now allowed,” he said with a broad

smile. “We can hold hands, too!”

I gave Kao the Time magazine, with its cover showing a cartoon-like Deng leaping over the Great Wall, to hold for a photo, but immediately afterwards he surrendered it to his English professor. Cartoons of political leaders were not allowed then, and even today China censors satirical cartoons of its leaders or policies.

China was different in almost every way from any other place I had ever been. The Western influence stopped abruptly in 1949 at the time of the communist revolution. Just about anywhere off the main squares was a time capsule of that era. People were sweeping the streets with stick brooms and hauling bricks around in



Ch.25. Changchun factory. Sending fenders to socialist heaven.

wooden ox carts. There was one kind of truck, the Yuejin Nj-130, painted army green, based on the 1940s-style Russian GAZ-51 that was the workhorse of the country. We were given a tour of the one factory where all the trucks in the country were made. The conditions were so primitive and unhealthy that even after a short visit almost all of us were coughing and complaining about the fumes and smoke.

It was remarkable how little the American system was understood. One of our guides, Mr. Wu, was saying how bad capitalism was. He was shocked

when we explained to him that all Americans are to some extent capitalists, but that it is tempered with democratic and regulatory practices, as well as social programs, and rule of law both domestically and internationally. Wu thought that only millionaires were capitalists and that only China had pure communism. Wu did not want to hear it when we suggested that the whole point of the “Great Leap Outward,” is the recognition that people work harder and more efficiently when they have incentives, which is a capitalistic principle. “Many people claim that Sweden is a socialist country,” I said, “but Sweden uses capitalism to pay for its safety net. They have more equality than in the U.S. because of progressive taxation that redistributes the wealth. Without some capitalism, there would be very little wealth to redistribute.”

Maybe Wu did not follow what I said, but he got to the point he wanted to make all along: “Soviet Union people are hegemonists,” Wu said. “They are enemy. America

must help China fight Soviet country.” Wu’s comment reminded me of when I was in Moscow and a Russian told me that we need to band together against the Chinese.

The highlight of the trip for me was our stay in the city of Jilin, near Changchun, in the province of Jilin, which borders both North Korea and Russia. On arrival at our hotel there, we were told that only one study group had preceded us. Except for this group of Americans, we were the first organized tour of Western tourists to visit since the Soviets had left. The first day in Jilin, one of the other members of the group and I took a walk along the road that led into town from our hotel. The road was lightly covered with snow and lined with bare trees. We walked as far as a bridge that spanned a large river. Across the street from the bridge was an old Catholic church with a tall Gothic spire that had been built with the help of French missionaries. Since the revolution it had been put to use as a place to store grain.

Chairman Mao encouraged the Chinese to proliferate while at the same time collectivizing the farms. These actions had a devastating impact on the country’s ability to feed and shelter itself and, after he was gone, resulted in the enactment of strict birth control measures. City dwellers were encouraged to have no more than one child and strict taxes were levied on couples who had more.

Because the Chinese had a strong preference for boys for financial reasons, the one-child policy resulted in a dramatic increase in infanticide. I saw an example of this myself. From the Jilin bridge in front of the church, I saw a newborn baby floating in the Songhua River. The umbilical cord and placenta were still attached, caught on a stick in the water and suspended like a kite. A small crowd gathered around to see what I was looking at. I pointed at the dead baby and they leaned over the railing to see. There was no reaction, only shrugs. So I looked up “baby girl” in my English-Chinese dictionary. I said “Nǚ yīng” and pointed again at the baby. Some of the men looked at the dictionary. The crowd tittered a little with comments about what I was interested in, but no one seemed impressed. Most shook their shoulders as if to show how they could not understand why I would point out such a mundane occurrence.

Another American and I speculated that she might have been born dead and discarded. It was only later I found out that most Chinese, in those days, were still bound by tradition to want male children. They wanted a son to carry on the family

name and support them in their old age. Chinese men used to think that if a man died without a son he broke the line of paternal ancestor-worship and would therefore lose his chance to be revered by future generations.

Once families were limited by the birth control measures and societal pressures, it became even more common to dump female newborns in the river and hope for better luck the next time. Two years after this, I would read that the Marriage



Jilin today. Photo credit: visitourchina.com

Law of 1980 prohibits “infanticide by drowning and any other acts causing serious harm to infants.” Today, the cathedral has been restored to use and it is surrounded by skyscrapers and modern development. Other than the river and the church it would be hard to find anything recognizable

today. But do not try looking on Google Earth as I was able to do in 2013. The Xi Jinping regime shut down Street View and now uses algorithms to scramble the street indicators in relation to the satellite view.

The next morning, we all visited a museum that had been built to house pieces of the auspicious Jilin Meteorite, which had fallen nearby on March 8, 1976. Together the 138 fragments collected weighted 2,616 kilograms, with the largest weighing in at 1,770 kilograms. Just this fragment alone was the largest known stony meteorite of its kind in the world. This celestial visitor, which split into three distinct fireballs, seemed to many Chinese to herald the regime change because three essential figures, Premier Zhou Enlai, Chairman Mao and one of the principle founders of the revolution, Chief of the Red Army, Field Marshall Zhu De, all died the same year. In the presence of these extraterrestrial visitors, it was announced that everyone would be taken to see

the site of a new hydroelectric dam, upstream of the aforementioned river. As much as this would have interested me, I decided to play sick. The tours were well-organized, but protocol had not yet been well established. After we returned to our hotel, our Chinese hosts were perplexed when I said I would not be going to the hydroelectric plant. I quickly realized that without a good excuse I was insulting them, so I told them I did not feel well and went up to my room.

My roommate cursed me for making it difficult for him to play sick too, but wished me a good time anyway. The plan, of course, was to slip out alone for a little private tour of the town. Normally the hotel was used to house soldiers and guards, some of whom were stationed at the entrance of the hotel. Their job, we were told, was to keep out the “bad men.” I hoped that their duties did not also include keeping in tourists. About fifteen minutes after everyone was gone, I smiled my way past the disconcerted guards. The foreign tourist business was so new for them, they did not know to stop me.

Just outside the hotel were some tourist watchers. They spotted my camera and smiled to indicate they wanted their picture taken. Soon after snapping the shutter, I realized they did not know the difference between a Polaroid camera and my SLR, and their faces dropped when no prints emerged from the bottom of my 35mm camera. For a few awkward moments I tried to explain the situation

in sign language, which only made matters worse. Finally I gave up and scurried off in the direction of the river. I crossed the bridge, passed the French cathedral being used as a granary, and headed down a broad street that led into the heart of Jilin, a city of over one million inhabitants. Heads turned as I walked. People stopped their bicycles



Ch.25. Workers in Jilin, looking like the 1800s

to stand and stare at me. I turned down a narrow side street that was paved with frozen mud and snow. Some of the older people, dressed in traditional garb, looked like they were from the 18th or 19th century. Crumbling mud brick houses with tin roofs lined the streets of the neighborhood. Each little house had at least one tall chimney, most of which were topped with faint plumes of smoke that trailed into a gray, drizzly sky. A man poked his head out of a house, and upon seeing me, quickly withdrew. A woman came outside with a broom of sticks to do something in her lifeless garden. When she caught eye of me, she turned around abruptly and ran back



Ch.25. Workers living in mud-brick shacks on dirt streets fled from me in terror.

inside. Her door closed with a resounding thud and then I saw her briefly appear in a window before the curtains were drawn.

A similar reaction greeted me for four or five blocks as I made my way through the neighborhood. Almost everyone reacted with fear and panic. When I tried to take a photograph, the effect was even more pronounced. One woman all but shrieked, waved her homemade broom in the air, dropped it from fright, and ran off in consternation.

What happened in that neighborhood was a harbinger of what was to

come. When I emerged from the unpaved street onto what I think was Beijing Road, droves of people scattered from me in fright—perhaps they thought the Russians were

returning. Pandemonium broke out when I tried to take a picture. People covered their faces and crowded into narrow doorways trying to get out of my sight. I walked down the shop-lined street, clearing it as I went, but kept the camera down.

After a while the brave and curious emerged to gather behind me at a safe distance. A few times I whirled around suddenly to take a picture. The crowd reacted as if I had leveled a machine gun at them. Many dozens of people were divided, as if by the lens of the camera, as they desperately clung to the side of the street. Before long, the density of the crowd prevented them from all dropping out of sight, and they gained some confidence.

Eventually the curious outnumbered the fearful and perhaps a hundred people began following me down the street. The only ones who did not join in were some of the wizened old folks who had seen the missionaries and Soviets come and go. It was a strange and exhilarating experience. I realized that no matter what I did, it would all be equally fascinating to this crowd, and it gave me a wonderful, uninhibited feeling. I skipped and danced down the street with abandon while making goofy faces and singing silly songs in my hopelessly off-key voice. The first song I thought of was the Herman and the Hermits hit from the Sixties: "I'm Henry the Eighth I am. Henry the Eighth I am, I am. I got married to the lady next door. She's been married seven times before...."



Ch.25. The crowd followed. The little girl carried my coat.

The crowd, especially the children, were mesmerized. I was the Pied Piper of Jilin. I impulsively grabbed a small boy and put him on my shoulders. He shrieked. For a moment I feared I had gone too far. At the risk of him wetting his britches from

fright, or me being arrested by the authorities, I held tight to his ankles and plunged ahead, continuing to skip and dance down the street. The other children began laughing and giggling. Before long, the boy on my shoulders relaxed and was waving triumphantly to the others from his perch atop the foreign giant. When we arrived at a major intersection, I put the boy down and was amazed when I looked behind and saw people all the way down the street as far as I could see. On the cross street, drivers were abandoning their big green trucks to join the crowd. There was no end to the mob and the question about whether I had gone too far with my antics began to nag me. But at this point I was finally able to take pictures of a friendly crowd.

All this attention was finally making me more self-conscious, and warm. When I took off my overcoat, a little girl offered to carry it. The crowd held their breath in anticipation. I was at a momentary loss for what to do next for all of those expectant people. Finally I thought to hold up my new-fangled digital watch that had red, lit-up numbers. I put it on the counting function and showed it around. If I had just demonstrated an iPhone, I do not think they would have been any less entertained. To give everyone a change to see this marvel, I took off the watch and let it circulate. Eyes turned to me for the next trick. I dug in my pockets and found some U.S. coins. I gave them away. I reached in my wallet and found three dollars. I presented those to the multitudes. They were voracious and wanted more. Finally I rewound the roll of film in the camera, removed the cartridge, and presented my camera to the crowd for their inspection.

With nothing else to show off, I raised my empty hands and began walking. When I looked behind me a minute later, I noticed a curious thing. From several directions my possessions were being passed back to me. Because the crowd was so dense, everything had to be passed over their heads. It looked like the humps on the back of Chinese dragons were moving toward me through a sea of humanity. One by one, every single one of the objects came back, my camera, the watch, the three dollars and even the coins. The little girl handed me back my overcoat. Then in what was the final and most touching act in a demonstration of trust, I received one final item. A ball point pen was handed to me with the name of a pizza restaurant in



Premier Zhao Ziyang (right). Photo courtesy of Julian Yang (left) 1985

Lincoln, Nebraska. Knowing that there were some people from Lincoln in our group, I accepted the pen and put it in my pocket.

The crowd thinned out after that. The few dozen people that remained gave me a walking tour that culminated at a sculpture surrounded by a clump of trees. Later I found out that it was built there to commemorate the atrocities that the Japanese committed in Jilin during World War II. By this time, I was completely lost. I tried to ask directions back to the river but it was hopeless. Suddenly a middle-aged man on a bicycle, with the scowl of a block warden, dispersed the crowd with stern commands. He gesticulated at me angrily and pointed toward the waning light in the grey western sky. I dutifully walked west, while he discouraged the curious by following behind me on his bicycle. He left me when we arrived at the cathedral-granary and shouted, “Hotel, hotel! Go you!”

I had walked more than ten steps, when a bus containing the other forty-nine Americans drove past me on their way back. I hurried to the hotel and eagerly presented my story along with the ball point pen to the mother and daughter from Lincoln, Nebraska.

“How was the hydroelectric plant?” I asked.

“It wasn’t even finished,” the mother said, “You didn’t miss a thing.”

Soon after, we left The People's Republic of China for Hong Kong. Even before I left Hong Kong for India on the 21st, it became clear that Deng had allowed a brief period of limited free speech only to consolidate his leadership in the Politburo. The Democracy Wall on Xidan street was closed down. Wei Jingsheng, who had called for more western-style freedoms, was arrested. The Democracy Wall was demolished and replaced with a shopping mall on a street with consumers driving private cars. China accomplished the four modernizations, including unbridled mercantilism, as promised by Deng Xiaoping, and for while democracy was a possibility.

As premier from 1980 to 1987, and as general secretary from 1987 to 1989, Zhao Ziyang sought to bring liberal change to China. Zhao made a famous speech to the students at Tiananmen Square on May 19, 1989 promising open dialogue, but the very next day Deng Xiaoping declared martial law in May 1989. Soon after the Tiananmen Square protests and massacre on June fourth, Zhao was put under house arrest for the rest of his life, and he was expunged from photographs and history books. It was while under detention that he came to believe in freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, an independent judiciary, and multi-party parliamentary democracy. We know this because of Zhao's autobiography, *Prisoner of the State: The Secret Journal of Premier Zhao Ziyang*, which was smuggled out of mainland China and published in 2009, four years after his death.

Deng's so-called "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" turned out to be a form of authoritarian capitalism, with severely limited democracy only within the 7% of the population that belongs to the Chinese Communist Party. After Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, the collective leadership model was broken and term limits were abolished. Xi was officially named "People's Leader" in 2019, a title previously only held by Mao Zedong. In emulation of Mao, Xi has been in the process of re-centralizing the government with state capitalism, with increasingly authoritarian control. In 2024, China ranked 145th among countries on the Economist Democracy Index, and Hong Kong has dropped to 87th place. Alarming, the United States, now ranked as a "flawed democracy," mostly as a result of its flawed electoral and judicial systems has dropped to 28th place even before Trump's second term.