

A Chinese experience

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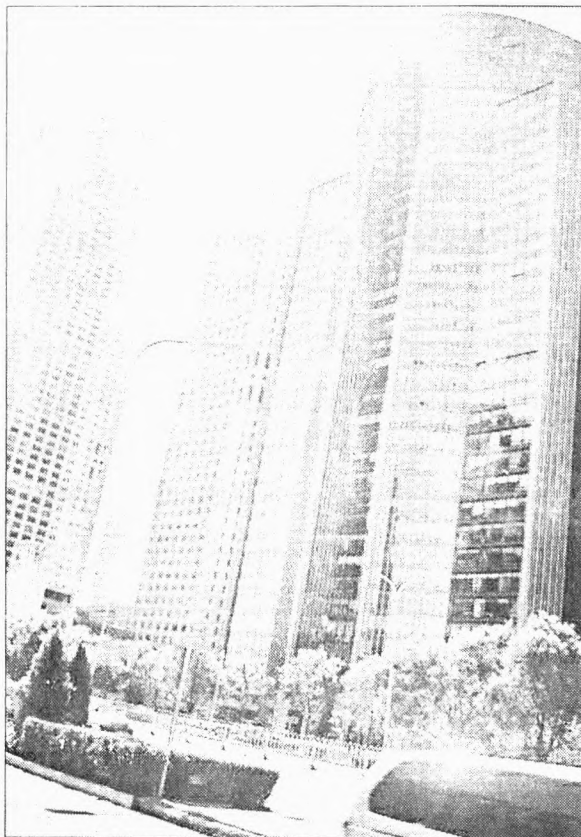
The architectural prowess of China is mirrored in every structure you find there. Chinese think big I thought, when I entered the city. The cities are clumped with skyscrapers outdoing one another. Rather than simple block or cylindrical, the buildings take diverse shapes.

If someone were to ask me "How is China?" I would reply "It's like climbing the Great Wall". No one would rightly imagine what it would be like to climb that fantastic military and ancient monument which runs over 5,000 kilometers, unless one is physically there to experience it. China is that. It has so much to offer, beyond one's imagination.

When the People's Republic of China celebrated 60 years there are various aspects one would harp on - the emerging world power, the economic giant, communism, one party rule, mammoth population and the list goes on. But let's leave all that to serious discussion. This is what China told me when I met her!

It was an egg shell I would say. You would not realize until you come out of it. The Beijing International Airport constructed to the shape of a half buried egg is equipped with all modern facilities, gigantic and wonderful. That was the first evidence I found that Chinese like shapes, mostly which are simply bound with nature.

The winding highways drew a complex grid in the Beijing city. Those are intimidating sending one unfamiliar with its roads and transport system into utter confusion. The wide roads with four to six lanes on one side are heavily packed with vehicles, especially during peak hours. Their public transport is a well regulated one with



The Skyscrapers

hundreds of comfortable and spacious passenger buses speeding into and out of the city. Female bus drivers are as common as three-wheelers here. Some buses were extra long having combined two bodies into one. Around 4.30 in the afternoon the city is swarmed with office leavers but strictly no crossing of roads. I wonder whether there was a single rebel who we often find on Colombo roads, happily runs about on the road to check the ability of drivers. There no one would dare to cross the road as such a

thought alone is devastating when you see the unceasing flow of vehicles. There are over-bridge pedestrian crossings all over the city leading to bus stops and subway stations.

The vehicles are left hand driven which always drove us to confusion when boarding a vehicle. Every time when we had to get into the vehicle we were sure to be standing on the wrong side until we were brought back to senses by the driver who signalled that the door was on the other side. It was a common moment of embarrassment

shared by all of us who were South Asians, with good humour passing the buck that, "oh the Chinese have got it wrong!"

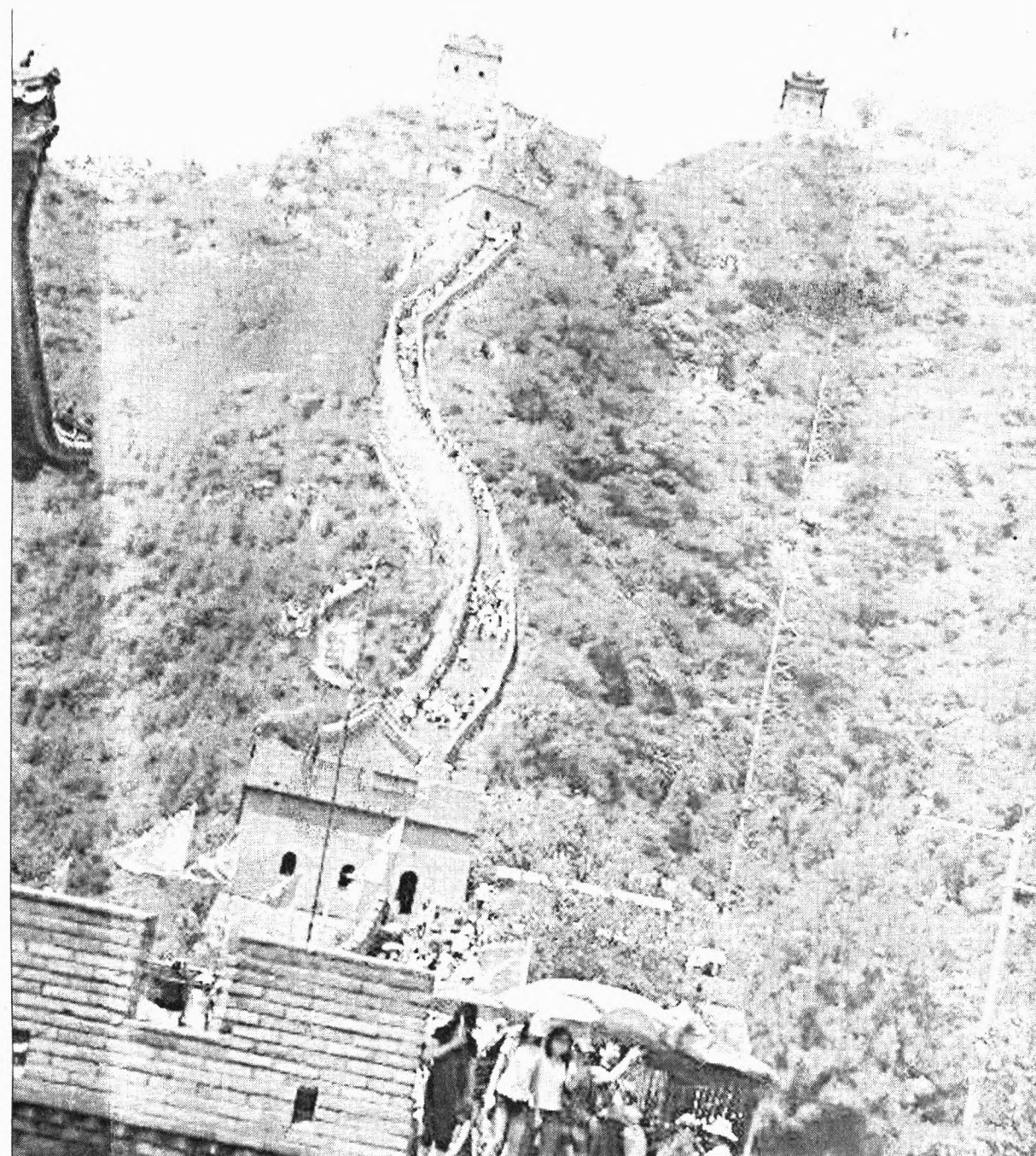
China's municipal authorities have devoted much time and thought on city beautification. The main city areas are meticulously designed and maintained by the city fathers with a dash of green and a palette of nature's vibrant hues to soothe the eyes of people crammed in the bustling city. It was summer any way. So both Beijing and Shanghai were spirited with beautiful flowers that hemmed the sidewalks and the gardens of the giant office buildings. It is truly a pleasant experience to pedal or walk along the sidewalks in the mornings being greeted by nature's beauties that sport vivid colours.

The architectural prowess of China is mirrored in every structure you find there. Chinese think big I thought, when I entered the city. The cities are clumped with skyscrapers outdoing one another. Rather than simple block or cylindrical, the buildings take diverse shapes. Pyramids, pencils, corns and many other shapes are ample and most structures are over 100 storeys.

The best example about shapes is the Bird's Nest, where the Beijing Olympics 2008 were held. The creation rose majestically amid the city covering a vast expanse of land.

The stadium nestled in the cover of huge entangled metal bars in the shape of a bird's nest is truly spectacular place that brings back the memories of the Olympics and now it has turned into an important tourist attraction. Hundreds of local and foreign tourists are streaming in daily to witness the massive stadiums where different games were held. The cheerful Olympic mascots are still standing there offering a moment of joy to the visitors hugging them to pose for photographs.

The journey to one of the world wonders was exciting indeed. The Great Wall at Badaling, around 60km North West of Beijing was our foremost hope when we set out early on our journey. As I mentioned one should



The Great Wall

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not be so ambitious to climb the entire Wall for the simple reason that it stretches east to west in northern China. It is said that one Great Wall runs over 5,000km. To reach the place it took good one hour drive from the city area. The road was deserted with less presence of vehicles and for our wonderment the landscape suddenly took a totally serene mood with mountains peeping on either side.

It was a breathtaking sight. The wall snaked over the mountains carpeted with trees and valleys meeting waterways occasionally. It was an arduous task to climb the stone stairs which are extremely steep.

The scorching summer sun sent our heads spinning making the task more difficult. Summer would not be the ideal occasion to climb the Great Wall as you get easily exhausted. However, the undying enthusiasm pushed us ahead. The stone blocks located in between provided us some relief to escape from the hard grip of the sun.

Some blocks used to

store weapons and garrison troops 2,000 years ago have turned into restaurants serving the weary travellers.

There are several shops selling Great Wall souvenirs along the course. It is loads of fun to click photographs in a Chinese emperor's or a warlord's attire with the Great Wall in the backdrop.

There are places hiring the king's robes and armours. Anyone can become a king at the Great Wall! Another question spurred our thoughts was that if love can be locked. We saw a line of locked padlocks in one part of the Wall. Some were new and some were rusty. The reason behind the locked affair was that there is a custom among the lovers visiting the Great Wall to put a padlock on that line and lock it wishing that their love last forever locked. It raised some doubts - what will become of the rusty padlocks!

Apart from the magnificent Great Wall there is another vast area one has to explore in China. Food - the Chinese cuisine is so

diverse and special. 'Be a Chinese when you are in China' was our motto during our stay there. It was impossible to taste all the Chinese food varieties as they vary from province to province and also include not so appetizing dishes to us.

Chinese food is colourful and their eating also elaborate. Traditional Chinese banquets include around eight courses I was told by my host when I was tired of eating plate after plate during one banquet. They love mushrooms, different varieties which we don't find in Sri Lanka.

The meals also included seaweeds that believed to restore vitality. Prawns, fish, crabs and stir fried vegetables were very often in our meals. All the dishes were beautifully decorated. Even fruits are cut in different shapes.

They eat a variety of meat. We had heard that it included even peculiar dishes. However we were saved by our hosts that we never came across such experience. But the Indian friend in our group who had been in China for sometime said he had tasted snake, dragonfly and we had to hush him up before he ran into details of other delicacies he had experienced!

Food habits and eating with the Chinese was another delightful experience. All would sit in a round table which has a

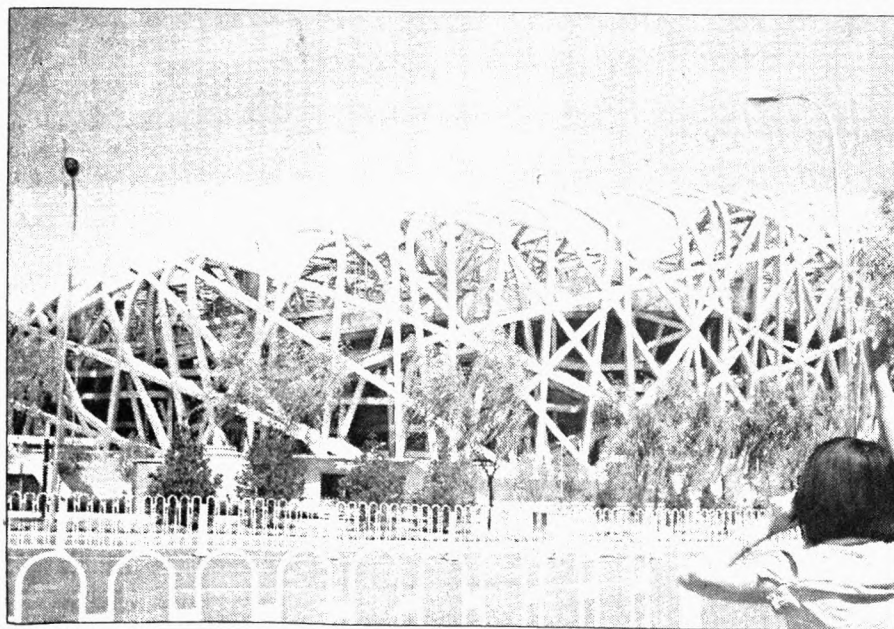
thick round glass tray fixed in the middle. The dishes are placed on the glass tray and the guests rotate the glass tray and the foods go round. You turn the tray and the food comes to you!

They eat with chopsticks in quick movements. After dropping several pieces several times my trial of eating with chopsticks came to an end and I retired back to fork. However our Bangladeshi friend who never gave up succeeded and soon he became a master in handling chopsticks.

The Chinese tea is also an essential part of Chinese culture present on every occasion. Be it a house or a ministerial conference, Chinese tea will be the official beverage. Freshly brewed tea presented in an attractive ceramic cup is hallmark of China. And most importantly you will never be allowed to finish drinking it as the cup is constantly refilled with tea. Even during meals the tea is a must.

You rarely find water with Chinese meals. Once I asked a Chinese friend why they don't drink water after meals. He said "it's tasteless so it is better to drink tea".

China has so much so to offer. We experienced only a speck of it. Its tradition, culture, hospitality and the landscape are sprawling in a vast territory. Isn't it right to say exploring China is like climbing the Great Wall?



Bird's Nest