

The quality of food in Peking and other down-to-earth things

PEKING — Before tackling graver subjects, it is irresistible to offer a few trifles of experience in this fascinating city. After all, the mere dust of daily life plays a great role in anyone's total impression of a new place.

Cookery, of course, is not a trifling matter. Judging by the Soviet Union, I had always supposed that good cooking was one of the first victims of every revolution, along with wicked landlords and feudalist exploiters. But this is far from true in China.

To be sure, the one restaurant that offers the old palace cooking—the Chinese equivalent of French haute cuisine—has been temporarily closed for the excavation of another vast air raid shelter. But Peking has an amazing wealth of "popular" restaurants. And in these, you eat rather better than you can in the best of the New York establishments where \$25 per person is a normal charge for luncheon.

Eating in these places is odd, for they are genuinely popular—absolutely jammed with working people and lacking the smallest outward pretensions. Yet they offer excellent meals for about 50 cents a head. They cheerfully produce genuine feasts, of incomparable variety and subtlety, for a couple of dollars a head with gallons of wine included. Weight watchers with a weakness for miraculous bargains should avoid Peking, in short.

Hair length is the chief guide to sex, hereabouts, since everyone but the soldiers wears the same blue jackets and trousers. This can cause trouble. When visiting schools, for example, progressive Western comrades, male, are regularly greeted with happy choruses of "Welcome aunty, welcome aunty."

Yet despite the uniformity of costume and the missing color of the old private shop fronts, it seems to me that Peking is an exceptionally cheerful city. Politeness, geniality, and purposeful bustle are the main notes. The new shops are amply stocked with good, simple, useful things. People eat well and look rosy-cheeked in the diamond air, though they live and work hard. Maybe the "mass line" has been relaxed in recent months

in favor of the natural Chinese joy in life. All this has been a great surprise.

The famous beauty of old Peking has been largely lost in the new city, and one may as well be honest: Architecture has not survived the Chinese revolution as well as cookery. Yet there are consolations.

The palaces of the Forbidden City have been admirably preserved from imminent decay, for example. And it is hard to think of any other architectural complex in the whole world that matches this one for richness, grandeur, perfection of proportion and order, delight and happy surprise, all masterially combined.

While our program was being settled, my wife and I literally passed days in the Forbidden City, mainly with great Chinese scholars of enormous charm and infinite patience. Some of these visits have had their drawbacks, like seeing a huge and superb collection of ancient Chinese bronzes in rooms of the approximate temperature of a gale-swept deep freeze.

Others have been pure pleasure, like being shown a selection of the palace museum's finest ancient pictures, with ample time to learn from the wise connoisseur-curator. Overall, one gets the somewhat bewildering impression that the most passionate and careful attention is now paid to China's majestic past and with the most astonishing results, too.

One of many discoveries as yet unknown abroad, for instance, is the tomb of a northwest frontier commander of the 2nd century A.D. The general was clearly a horse lover, for he arranged to be buried with bronzes of all his horses—the horses of his guard, his chariot and carriage horses, and his own special mounts of the "blood-sweating" breed from Central Asia. Nothing like these bronze tomb figures has ever been seen, and they are also marvels of beauty.

The truth is, I keep thinking nervously of all the woolly minded Westerners who made such fools of themselves in Russia in the cruel '30s. For it may as well be faced, my wife and I have been having glorious time

E'en the mighty Alsop hath fallen. This is really something. He came aboard the Gripsholm in July, 1942, just out of Japanese internment camp at Hong Kong, where he had been some sort of a running dog for Chennault. Even a bit starved, he was still the classic Eastern establishment, Wasp frump, a snob, and thoroughly rude and obnoxious. One look was enough to tell you that here was one of those virtually fictional characters incapable of smiling or experiencing human emotion.

I don't think he's ever been in North China before, and like Rusk apparently had no experience outside the Chungking crooks with whom Chennault was dealing.