

Clive James

FLYING VISITS

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Mrs T. in China

1 The Dragon Lady Flies East

IT WAS Wednesday in Peking. Out of a pale sky as delicately transparent as the finest *ch'ing-pai* ware of the Sung dynasty came the wolf-grey and sharktooth-white RAF VC-10 bearing the great British War Leader Margaret Thatcher and her subservient retinue.

The British Media, who were along for the ride, tumbled down the rear gangway and took up their positions in a tearing hurry, because the War Leader would be among the first of the official party to deplane. Hands in China have to be shaken in order of precedence. Alphabetical order is out of the question, especially when you consider that the Chinese

version is calculated by counting the number of brushstrokes in the surname.

The British Ambassador introduced his illustrious visitor to the Chinese official greeters and to the British military attaché, whose particular job, it was rumoured, was to make sure that the War Leader's Husband didn't run into difficulties with the *mao tai*. A clear white local fluid in which toasts are drunk, *mao tai* has the same effect as inserting your head in a cupboard and asking a large male friend to slam the door.

Every world power, down to and including the Fiji islands, likes to think that its indigenous liquor can rob visiting dignitaries of the ability to reason, but let there be no doubt about *mao tai*. China runs on it. Without it, the Chinese hierarchs would be forced to listen to one another. It was therefore plainly advisable that the War Leader's Husband should be limited to a single crucible of the stuff per banquet, if necessary by military force. The Media, needless to add, were under no such compulsion.

Moving a discreet step behind his all-powerful wife, the Husband was looking ravishing in a silk tie of Ming underglaze blue and a smile of inlaid ivory, but it was the War Leader herself who captured all eyes. Her champagne and rhubarb jersey suit recalled painted silk of the Western Han period, her shoes were dawn carnations plucked at dusk, but it was her facial aspect that must have struck the first thrill of awe into her prospective hosts.

Nothing like that skin had been seen since the Ting potters of Hopei produced the last of their palace-quality high-fired white porcelain with the creamy glaze; her hair had the frozen flow of a Fukien figurine from the early Ch'ing; and her eyes were two turquoise bolts from the Forbidden City's Gate of Divine Prowess, an edifice which, it was clear from her manner, was just a hole in a wall compared to the front door of 10 Downing Street.

The official greeters having been dealt with, the War Leader's party climbed into the waiting limousines and

howled off towards town, followed closely by the British Media in a variety of specially arranged transport. The basic Chinese written character for any wheeled vehicle looks like a truck axle viewed from above. I was thinking this while standing there alone. The only Media man to watch the plane land instead of being on it, I was now the only Media man left behind at the airport: a bad augury for my first stint as a foreign correspondent.

By the time I reached town in the back of a Mitsubishi minibus laden with ITN camera boxes, the War Leader had lunched privately and was already due to arrive at the Great Hall of the People in the Square of Heavenly Peace, there to press the flesh with the inscrutable notables of the regime's top rank.

The War Leader's transit through China was competing with a simultaneous visitation by Kim Il Sung of North Korea. Despite respectful articles about Mrs Thatcher in the daily papers (both the English-language *China Daily* and the Chinese-language *Renmin Ribao* carried the official No. 10 handout glossy that makes a Shouchou bronze mirror look relatively unpolished) there was a general feeling that Kim was being given the more effusive welcome, possibly as a tribute to his prose style, by which he has already, single-handed, outdone those Chinese encyclopaedists who codified the classic writings into 36,000 volumes nobody ever read.

But if Kim was hogging the local television time, it could only be said that he was, after all, the leader of a fraternal Socialist country attuned to the way of Lenin and Mao, who have the same embalming fluid flowing through their veins even though they now lie in separate mausoleums. The War Leader was something else, something alien. And yet, somehow, something familiar. Where had the Chinese seen that icy strictness before?

There were only a few thousand people in the Square of Heavenly Peace, which meant that it was effectively deserted, because it can hold half a million spontaneously cheering

enthusiasts on a big day. The armies of eight different Western countries paraded there in 1900 without even touching the sides. But they did leave a lasting feeling of humiliation, and when you take into account the fact that it was the British who actually burned down the Summer Palace in 1860 it will be understood that the Chinese were under no obligation to go berserk with joy. They hung out a few Red flags and laid on a Combined Services honour guard of troops all exactly the same size, like one of those terracotta armies buried by Qin Shi Huangdi in Shaanxi Province, a district which was even at that moment being toured by the heavily publicised Kim.

While the War Leader checked the honour guard for any deviation in altitude, Peking's only remaining large portrait of Mao looked down from the Gate of Heavenly Peace across the thinly populated square. Some Young Pioneers suddenly slapped their tambourines but the War Leader didn't flinch. She didn't smile at them either. She was a mask, no doubt practising her inscrutability for the encounter with Premier Zhao Ziyang, whom she accompanied inside, there to begin the opening dialogue which instantly became famous as the Great Fog Conversation.

Among the gilt friezes and cream plaster columns of the Great Hall, far below a ceiling full of late-Odeon period light fittings with frosted globes, Zhao Ziyang, the man whose name sounds like a ricochet in a canyon, asked the War Leader whether the cause of fog in London had anything to do with the climate. His guest said that it was due to the burning of coal but now there was no coal burned, so there was no fog. But people in Peking, her host countered, burn much coal, yet there is no fog. Clearly he had no intention of letting the point go, but her tenacity equalled his, and as the Media were ushered from the hall the War Leader was to be heard giving Zowie a chemistry lesson. Apparently the coal smoke had been more concentrated in London than it ever could be in Peking.

The Welcoming Banquet that night was in the Banqueting

Hall of the Great Hall of the People: different room, same light fittings. The War Leader was in a long dress the colour of potassium permanganate, thus to drive home her superiority in chemistry. Zowie's speech was tough on the Hegemonists, meaning the Soviet Union and Israel. Of China's hegemonic activities in Tibet, not a mention. He sat down and she stood up, to deliver a speech ten times as Chinese as his, both in its subtlety and range of cultural reference. She quoted 'one of your T'ang poets' to the effect that distance need be no division. The T'ang poet in question was, I am able to reveal, Wang Wei, but for her to name him would have sounded like showing off.

She was far enough ahead already, since Zowie had neglected to quote even a single Lake poet. There was also the possibility that she was making an arcane reference to Mao, who was, in his own poetry, much drawn to the T'ang style. Out there, hovering above his mausoleum, his immortal spirit was no doubt wondering whether his successors would be up to handling a woman of this calibre. Inside the mausoleum, his wax-filled corporeal manifestation lost one of its ears some time ago but it was rapidly sewn back on, thus restoring the physical integrity which had been denied to his fellow artist Vincent van Gogh. Mao was out of it, but Zowie was in the land of the living, where the real decisions are made.

There were two main toasts, both taken in *mao tai*. The Media watched the War Leader's Husband, and pooled their observations afterwards. The consensus of their data was that he had scored a hole-in-one on the first but had settled for a par four on the second. Behind the flower-and-frond, yellow-dove-decorated centrepiece of the main table, the War Leader and the Premier kept talking. Nobody knew what they had said during the afternoon, but it seemed possible that the War Leader had now shifted the subject of casual conversation from fog to the light fittings. She spent a lot of time looking at them, when not eating. The military orchestra played a rhythmically questionable cha-cha, but

the food was sensational, especially a crispy noodle pancake which the Westerners attacked futilely with chopsticks until they noticed the Chinese sensibly picking it up with their fingers.

Next morning, before more talks with the War Leader, Zowie told the assembled Media that there was no prospect of the Chinese yielding on the very point at issue, namely Hong Kong. Since the assembled Media included the Hong Kong Media, there was some consternation at this show of inflexibility, but as far as I know only one foreign correspondent, myself, formed the opinion that it might have been prompted by fear. Even without the Falklands Factor, Mrs Thatcher would have been perceived by the Chinese as a strong woman. Indeed they call her the Strong Woman. But in addition to her already renowned strictness she had fought and won a war. That rings a bell with the Chinese – a large bronze *chung* bell of the Western Chou period, decorated with projecting knobs and interlaced dragons.

The Chinese think historically at all times, and in their long history there have been at least three notoriously tough women: the Empress Wu of the T'ang dynasty, the Empress Dowager Ci Xi of the Chi'ing dynasty, and Jiang Qing of the Mao dynasty, otherwise known as Madame Mao. Though none of these women, especially the last, could be considered precisely sound from the modern Socialist viewpoint, they had undoubtedly shared the virtue of decisiveness.

The Empress Wu, for example, had ascended from the status of Grade Four concubine (massage and hot towels) all the way to the throne, partly through having a child by the Emperor, smothering it, and pointing the finger at his favourite. Having attained unchallenged rule, she dealt with any potential criticism by depriving its perpetrator of all four limbs and keeping what was left alive in a jar of pickle, or hanging it up on a hook.

Mrs Thatcher had not been quite so firm with Norman St John-Stevas, but there could be little doubt that she belonged to a great tradition. She was the Fourth Strong Woman in

Chinese history, an invader from the strange kingdom of the Two Queens, in which one Queen stayed at home minding the palace while the other came marching towards you carrying a severely cut handbag like an Anyang Shang dagger-axe with a jade blade. Give her an inch and she would take the whole of Chang'an Avenue, from the Dongdan intersection to the Babaoshan Cemetery for Revolutionaries (number 10 bus).

After further secret conversations with Zowie about fog and light fittings, the Strong Woman arrived at the British Embassy to meet the British and Chinese communities. This was the second big party of the year for the diplomats of the China station. The first had been the QBP (Queen's Birthday Party), but that was an annual event, well understood. This one was for the other Queen, the one that gets out there and wins wars.

For many of the minor diplomatic faces it was a big moment in a hard life. The Strong Woman gratified them by looking her best, in a plum-blossom and quince-juice silk dress finely calculated to remind Chinese guests of a *mo ku* painting of the Late Northern Sung, although the Chinese might equally have reminded her that William the Conqueror successfully invaded England during that period.

But the garden party was not an occasion for confrontation. Instead she socialised, meeting, *inter alios*, the delightful Katherine Flower, presenter of BBC TV's 'Follow Me', which teaches English to the Chinese. Francis Matthews, the star actor in the programme, is the most famous British face in China. Katherine comes second and Mrs Thatcher third, but by this time she was catching up fast, although getting barely half as much air time as Kim Il Sung, who was still checking out that terracotta army. Perhaps he had at last found the ideal audience for his brand of oratory: statues don't shuffle. Also present at the garden party was the Hong Kong shipping magnate Sir Y. K. Pao. Destined to crop up everywhere in the itinerary, Powie is a name you should note. He and the War Leader go back a long way together, to the

time, one gathers, when he was before the mast and she was being called to the bar.

Thursday afternoon was culture gulch, meaning that the Strong Woman could plan her upcoming talks with Deputy Prime Minister Deng Xiaoping while her face and feet were on automatic pilot. At the Conservatory of Music there was much emphasis on Beethoven, of whom there is a plaster bust in even the most humble homes, but the star act was undoubtedly the girl Wu Man. Later on she will be the woman Wu Man, but punning on Chinese names is a low form of humour. Meanwhile she is the best young player of the *pipa* in China. On the *pipa*, which is less unlike a zither than it is unlike anything else, Wu Man played some dance music of the Yi tribe. The Yi tribe sounded like a fun outfit, and for a moment the War Leader relaxed.

Relaxing at the British Book Exhibition was less easy, because the joint was packed with a chosen spontaneous crowd of nervous intellectuals. One of my own books was among the carefully selected thousand and I had visions of helping to make a three-pronged impact on China's spiritual future, along with Margaret Drabble and Iris Murdoch, but there is the problem of distribution. The War Leader's Husband found it hard to see why all the rest of the Chinese couldn't just walk into the library like this lot and sit down to read. A very impressive British Council lady, who speaks effortless Mandarin and is also able to communicate with the Strong Woman's Man, explained that there was a considerable number of Chinese out there, many of them living quite a long way away.

After the standard plum-blossom beauty of a Peking sunset the War Leader dined privately with the British business community while the Media formed groups to eat Peking Duck, a large beast which needs a team of people sitting around its perimeter and all eating inwards for several hours before it disappears. Apart from duck demolition there is practically nothing to do in Peking after 10 p.m. except dance to old Fats Domino 45 rpm EPs, usually on your own. The

Chinese opera on television is OK if you like acrobats. Then comes a blank hissing screen followed by a fitful sleep and one million bicycle bells at dawn. It is Friday, and the population is on the move again.

So was the War Leader, entering the increasingly familiar Great Hall of the People for the first meeting with Deputy Prime Minister Deng Xiaoping, hero of the biggest come-back story since de Gaulle. Mrs Mao had him down and almost out, but he hung in. Deng knows a Strong Woman when he sees one. He was seeing one now, with the strawberry-blotched blue taffeta suavely off-setting the *cloisonné* enamel of her *maquillage*, so reminiscent of a Ming dynasty incense-burner. He had heard how Zhao had been bested in the Great Fog Conversation, but Zhao was a youngster. He, Deng, was an old hand.

Deng initiated the Great Food Conversation, using the Governor of Hong Kong, invited for that very purpose, as an unwitting foil. Deng said it had been great fun welcoming Kim Il Sung. Having thrown his right, he crossed with his left, saying the food had been very good in Sichuan. The Governor of Hong Kong agreed that the food was good in Sichuan. But the War Leader refused to be drawn. She said that on her earlier visit to China – managing to imply that she would visit China more often if there were not so many wars to win – she had found the food best in Suzhou. 'Well,' said Deng, 'I don't think so.' He had been forced into a hollow protestation, an uncomfortable position for beginning secret talks. The widow of Chou En-lai, holding a bouquet of roses specially flown out by British Airways, complimented the War Leader on her wisdom and tact. 'At your age,' she added, 'it can be said it is the Golden Age.' The Strong Woman took the compliment as her due, forgetting to return it. What was she, a devil? For in the great Sung painting 'The Picture of the Search in the Mountain,' are not the women of angelic appearance more ferocious than the dragons?

The War Leader stumbled on the way down the steps but

the Media's excitement soon subsided – she was merely preoccupied, not fatigued. Off she went with the Chinese for a visit to the Summer Palace, the replacement, on a different site, for the one the British burned down. Actually the interloping forces burned down the replacement too, but it had been replaced again. If the Chinese should bring this awkward subject up, she could always remind them that they, in turn, burned down the British Embassy in the days of the Cultural Revolution.

Later on Friday afternoon the Media were granted access to the War Leader so that she could announce what sounded like a stand-off in negotiations. Confucians among the Media might have said her voice was choked with emotion. T'ang positivists might have said she had Negotiator's Throat. She herself could hardly speak, but this fact meant nothing unless you could see what shape Deng was in, and he wasn't available.

It was a pity that, whether for protocol reasons or because of strained vocal cords, Deng didn't show up at the Return Banquet thrown by the visiting team in the Great Hall of the People, because the War Leader had saved her most stunning outfit until last. A magenta silk gown that recalled Chi'en-lung *flambeau* ware at its most exquisitely uninhibited, it clashed with the pink tasselled chairs, but that wasn't her problem. Let them change the chairs. Her throat was still in tatters but she delivered a Chinese proverb in both languages. 'It is better to come and see for yourself than to read a hundred reports.' The Chinese version sounded a bit short. The Party functionary sitting beside me described it as 'understandable'. His name was Fang so I did not argue.

Zowie's return speech was the usual railway station announcement read at high speed, but when the eating started he indicated bilateral flexibility by employing a fork. The toasting fluid was a pale British equivalent of *mao tai*, and some of the British dishes bore a close resemblance to shark's fin soup and fish lips, but the imported thin mints were a hit. The rapidly improving military band played a very good

arrangement of 'Greensleeves'. There are some instrumentalists in that combo who would make von Karajan drop his whip.

As they dined on relentlessly, it was dusk outside, with the curved yellow-tiled roofs of the Forbidden City glowing softly like honeycomb through a sea of grey powder. The War Leader had chosen the right time for Peking – a time of transition, when the Lotus Lake in the Winter Palace Park is thick with green leaves, after the blossoms have fallen and before the roots have been collected to be eaten. Out on the lake rises the Jade Island, coming to a point, like a lovely pimple, in the dome of the White Dagoba. When Mrs Mao was at the height of her power, she closed the Winter Palace Park to the people and reserved the Jade Island for her own use, so that she could ride her horse in private.

In China's history, a few women are tyrants and millions of them are chattels. The problem is to make them something in between. You can still see thousands of women in Peking whose feet were bound when they were young. You can't miss that awkward splay-footed walk: they must forever struggle to keep their balance. Feet are no longer bound but that does not mean that minds are free. Despite everything the Revolution can do, the women still serve the men, the girls are still snobs who marry boys who get ahead, and you still can't get ahead without connections. The Revolution, like any other Chinese dynasty, is behind the times. Margaret Thatcher is a democratic product to an extent of which even the most radical Chinese theorist can hardly dream. She doesn't even have to think about it, and often forgets to.

On Saturday morning the Strong Woman rose into the air, heading for Shanghai with the Media clinging to her wings. After that would come Canton, with Hong Kong soothingly employed as the gate of departure. For does not Wang Wei's poem say that a chip off the dragon's tooth is a spear in its side? No, it does not. I made that one up.

September 26, 1982

2 The Great Leap Homeward

HER NEGOTIATIONS in Peking for the nonce complete, the Dragon Lady flew south towards Shanghai, altering her image in mid-air, as dragons are wont to do. For the purpose of hard bargaining with the Chinese political leaders she had been the Woman of Jade, a material so tough that it was not until the period of the Warring States that the tools were discovered which could make it fully workable into such treasurable artefacts as the *pi* disc. But now her purpose was to spread enlightenment, so she took on the aspect of the Woman of Science, Yin Sage of the Book of Changes, Adept of the sixty-four Symbolic Hexagrams, and regular reader of the *New Scientist*. Corralled into the back end of her winged conveyance, the British Media, showing distinct signs of wear, resigned themselves to yet another punishing schedule.

The Yin Sage arrived in Shanghai to find herself lunching with the omnipresent Hong Kong shipping magnate Sir Y.K. Pao, a sort of soy-sauce Onassis. The Chinese need Powie to build ships, but unfortunately for them Powie's expertise comes accompanied by his personality. Powie puts on a show of dynamism that makes Jimmy Goldsmith seem like a Taoist contemplative. As an old pal of the British Prime Minister, Powie was well placed to make her visit look like an occasion for which he had helped grease the wheels.

The PM's advisers must have realised that it was enough for her to be representing democracy without also representing capitalism in one of its more unpalatably flagrant forms, because the bleary-eyed British Media were eventually allowed to get the impression that Powie's knighthood did not, in HMG's view, necessarily entitle him to behave as if he

were carrying ambassadorial credentials to the Far East. But for the moment Powie was at the controls and hustling full blast. He had a new ship all set to be launched and there were no prizes for guessing who would swing the bottle.

After the big lunch, the big launch. Shanghai's Jiangnan shipyards look pretty backward beside the Japanese equivalent, in which half a dozen engineers in snow-white designer overalls converse with one another by wrist-video while a team of Kawasaki Unimate robots transforms a heap of raw materials into a fully computerised bulk carrier with a jacuzzi in the captain's bathroom. Here there were about a thousand Chinese queuing up to borrow the spanner. But the atmosphere was festive. An air of spontaneity – real spontaneity, as opposed to the mechanical variety laid on by Party directives – was generated by a band truck tricked out with balloons and dispensing the Shanghai equivalent of Chicago jazz. A very big drum and several different sizes of gong combined to produce the typical Chinese orchestral texture of many obsolete fire-alarms going off at once.

Next to the completed ship, which Powie had cunningly named *World Goodwill*, there was a sign in English saying BE CAREFUL NOT TO DROP INTO THE RIVER. The Yin Sage was dressed in navy blue with a white hat, thereby establishing a nautical nuance, an impression furthered by her consort's azure tie. Actually it was the same tie he had worn when arriving in Peking, but this was a different city, and in China every city is a whole new nation. It is not just that there are a thousand million Chinese who have never seen the world. There are a thousand million Chinese who have never seen China. So if you wear the same tie at different ends of the country it is unlikely that you will cause the locals to whisper behind their hands. No stranger to the Far East, the Yin Sage's Yang Companion has got such considerations well taped.

Powie rose to his Gucci-shod feet in order to convince anybody who still needed convincing that he bears a truly remarkable resemblance to the late Edward G. Robinson. He

thanked his distinguished sponsor for being there. He thanked everybody else for being there as well. He thanked the Chinese Government for its breadth of vision. He was on the point of thanking the population of China individually, but the Woman of Science had a schedule to meet. Referring, in her Falklandish capacity as a connoisseur of naval architecture, to 'this splendid ship', she spoke of how it epitomised the ability of Socialist China and the freely enterprising West to work in harmony. 'This ship . . . is a symbol of the close relationship.' It was a relationship ship.

She launched the relationship ship by swinging an axe to cut the line that released the bottle. The bottle declined to break, but according to Chinese tradition it is the blow of the axe which matters, not the result. In the *I Ching*, according to the great naturalist philosopher Chu Hsi's justly celebrated interpretation, *Li*, the cosmic principle of organisation at all levels, is coterminous with and ultimately inseparable from *chi*, or matter-energy. To put it another way, it's the thought that counts.

The relationship ship was already in the water and thus destined to remain immobile after being launched, but the band truck, or Truck of Good Luck, erupted into a rousing rendition of its signature tune, 'Seven Ancient Fire-Engines Failing to Discover the Location of Chow Fong's Burning House'. The Yin Sage, charmingly referred to by a nervous young female interpreter as 'the Rather Honourable Margaret Thatcher', took leave of Powie with the air of one who knows that the separation will be all too short.

She was headed for the Shanghai Institute of Biochemistry of the *Academica Sinica*, whither all the British Media, except one, decided not to accompany her. My colleagues, wise in the trade, had knowledgeably concluded that now was the time to file their copy, take a well-earned nap, or check out the attractions of what had once been China's most westernised big city, the first one to import every occidental fad up to and including Communism. In Shanghai it is even possible to buy an alcoholic drink if you turn the right

corners. The girls are just as unattainable as in Peking but they dress more provocatively, with a cut to their comradely trousers which suggests that they are not above withholding some of their labour from the commune in order to sit up at night resewing the odd seam.

It would have been good to spend more than just a few minutes following Sidney Greenstreet's ghost past the old Western Concession compounds of the Bund, and on top of that there was the Shanghai National Museum, containing pictures which I had been waiting to see half my life, and of which I can only say that if I could write the way those guys painted I would use up a lot less Tipp-Ex. But like a fool I went to the Biochemistry Institute, and like a fool I got lucky. The Woman of Science put on her best public performance of the tour so far, and I was the only scribe there to cover it.

The performance was good because for once she wasn't performing. Biochemistry is her field and the assembled scientists were among the top boys in it, so when they spoke she was for a moment distracted from her usual self-imposed task of proving her superiority to everyone else. The head of the Institute apologised, in beautifully eloquent English, for his English, which he had not spoken for forty years. 'Today we are very honoured to have you with us. First of all, may I introduce Professor . . .' He introduced a dozen professors, respectively in charge of such departments as insulin synthesis, nucleic acids, biomemory, molecular radiation and a lot of other things I couldn't catch. Most of it was Chinese to me but clearly it was grist to the mill of the Woman of Science, especially the stuff about insulin, which she was concerned with when studying under her famous mentor, the Nobel Prizewinner Dorothy Hodgkin - a name revered by the Shanghai scientists, who had a picture of her in their visitors' book.

That the Yin Sage was Dorothy Hodgkin's Pupil plainly went down a storm with the Chinese, in whom the dynastic principle is well ingrained. The Pupil's pupils sharpened, I noticed, when one of the scientists announced that the

laboratory was working on leukaemia and liver cancer. Since the same laboratory had already developed, among other things, such eminently applicable ideas as the reprogramming of fish to breed in still water, there was no need to think they would not crack the case, always provided that their government gave curing old humans the same priority as feeding new ones. Of these latter, needless to say, there is no shortage, and in fact the Shanghai laboratory is working on a fertility drug (derived from the same LH-RH analysis that fixed the fish) which could produce irreversible infertility at high dosages – a possibility which the Woman of Science immediately saw might be open to abuse, and said so.

Touring the individual laboratories, she interviewed the scientists working in each. They all spoke dazzling scientific English, with words like 'cucumber' falsely emphasised and phrases like 'polypeptide macromolecular electrokinesis' fluently delivered. After she left each room I backtracked to ask the interviewees, relaxing after their ordeal, whether she still knew her stuff. Without exception they said she did. She missed a trick, though, in the room where they analyse proteins by counting dots. Reminiscing, the Woman of Science said: 'We had no computers in those days to analyse the dots.' Her hosts were too polite to tell her the truth, which was that as far as they were concerned those days were still here. Even to the inexpert eye, the laboratory is painfully under-equipped. The rubber tubes are perished, glass is hoarded like gold, and there is obviously no more computer time in a year than there are rainy days in the Gobi. They're counting those dots with an abacus. When the Woman of Science handed a Sinclair desk computer to the Japanese it was coals to Newcastle, or at any rate bamboo shoots to Tokyo. The same computer given to the Shanghai Biochemistry Institute would have made some long friends.

The banquet that night was hosted by the Mayor of Shanghai, who generously announced in his speech of welcome that 'British people have always had a great feeling for the Chinese'. He could have put this another way, saying

that British people were instrumental in poisoning half the country with opium and showed an enthusiasm unusual even among the European nations when it came to humiliating the Chinese by such practices as shutting them out of their own cities. The park which was denied to 'dogs and Chinese' is still there on the river side of the Bund. Nowadays it is enjoyed by the indigenous population but they allow us to share it, which is a lot more than we ever did for them. One only hoped that the Yin Sage knew how tactful the Mayor was being in not mentioning any of that.

The possibility that the Woman of Science might be a bit thin in the area of Chinese history was a constant worry to those of us in her entourage who wished her well on her delicate mission. But she caught all eyes in her dress of vivid *K'ang-hsi* cobalt blue, a veiled reminder that in the eighteenth century (our time) the European demand for Chinese porcelain was matched by an equally eager supply. The Mayor, perhaps forewarned, had countered in advance by gracing every table with a full kit of Yi Sing stoneware specially procured for the occasion. It looked like bitter chocolate and provided an ideal container for the dreaded *mao tai*, the liquid land-mine, the anti-personnel potion employed by Chinese functionaries to render one another's official speeches inaudible. Since first encountering the stuff a week before, the British Media had settled on two ways of coping with it. You could down it in one and get drunk straight away or you could sip at it and get drunk almost straight away.

In Shanghai, however, one was likely to forget about drinking in favour of eating, because the food was astonishing – compared with Peking, there was a playful savour to its presentation which suggested that we were already getting closer to the West. The same thing was suggested by the attire and general demeanour of the waitresses, who wore skirts instead of trousers and in an alarming number of cases were unmanfully pretty. British scribes and cameramen fought one another for a smile. If you are the kind of man who falls in love through the eyes, you will fall in love a hundred

times a day in China. No wonder that in the Chinese artistic heritage the pictures outweigh the words and even the words are pictures. The whole place soaks the optic nerve like a long shot of morphine into a fresh vein. I smiled like a goof from daylight to dusk.

Among those prominent behind the top table's array of carved pumpkins was the inevitable Powie. The Mayor referred to him as 'Mr' Y.K. Pao, thereby depriving him of his knighthood, which he must have received for services to athletics, because when the Woman of Science went up to congratulate the orchestra Powie was out of his starting blocks and congratulating them right along with her. The great Australian sprinter Hector Hogan used to move that fast but he needed spiked shoes to do it.

Onward to Canton, where there was another banquet, this time for lunch instead of dinner. The venue was the Dong-fang hotel, a Disneyland Chinese emporium all dolled up in funfair gilt filigree. By now you could feel the West close by, just outside the Pearl River delta, a jetfoil ride across a short stretch of the South China Sea. People from Hong Kong come here to visit their relatives and give them that greatest of all gifts, a television set. The girls at the cashier's desk have pocket calculators which the scientists in Shanghai would covet and which the clerks in the Minzu hotel in Peking would probably fail to recognise. China is a big place. Here, at the edge, it is a bit like the West, but the edge, we had learned, is a long way from the middle.

We were all Old China Hands now. Even the Woman of Science, clad today in a green dress recalling the *famille verte* teapots of the Ch'ing, was looking blasé. The locals kept bringing forth food fit to change the mind of anyone who had been harbouring the notion that Cantonese cuisine means offal rolled in red ochre and glazed like a brick. It was wonderful, but after a week of banqueting we had had enough. The Yin Sage's impeccable chopstick technique did not falter. She could still pick up a greased peanut without lifting either elbow. But her usually transparent azure eyes

had grown slightly occluded, like the milky-violet glaze which the Chinese collectors of ceramics call *kuei-mien-ch'ing*, or ghost's-face blue. Perhaps she had seen too much of Powie.

She escaped him on the short flight to Hong Kong. When her plane took off he was not on it. I was not on it either, having failed to fill out the right forms some weeks before. After several hours spent anxiously facing the prospect of staying in China for ever – imagine how long it will be before they get breakfast television – I secured the last seat on a packed Trident and scrambled aboard. As I came stooping through the door I recognised a certain pair of Gucci shoes. It was Powie. He assured me that Mrs Thatcher's trip was 'very successful' and that she had done a grand job. Powie has a lot in common with David Frost – permanent jet-lag, an unusual way with the English language, and an infallible nose for the main action.

The approach to Kai Tak, Hong Kong's notorious airport, starts between mountains and continues between buildings. As the joke says, Hong Kong is the only city where street-vendors sell you things before you land. The place struck me, even at the very moment when I thought I was about to strike it, as a kind of slant-eyed Las Vegas. No sooner had the plane stopped rolling than Powie was outside and into a black Toyota, while your reporter was making his solitary and sweat-soaked way to the Hilton, where the rest of the British Media were already up to their necks in pine-scented suds while they filed copy on the bathroom telephone. The wealth of Hong Kong would seem ridiculous anyway, but after the Chinese People's Republic you feel like a nun dropped into Babylon. To dial room service is to experience disgust, and for half an hour I hesitated. All right, half a minute.

The Dragon Lady, guarded by police SWAT squads up on the roofs, had by now transformed herself into the Keeper of Secrets. The fate of Hong Kong, known to her faithful consort as Honkers, was locked in her mind and safe from divination, even by the methods of geomancy or *feng-shui* (the winds and the waters). While the Hong Kong Media went

crazy with speculation, she did her chores, starting with a visit to the Scots Guards at Stanley Fort. After Northern Ireland, Honkers is a cushy posting. The wives swim in the clear water of Repulse Bay and have babies while the going is good. The Keeper of Secrets dropped out of the sky by helicopter and moved among them in a midnight-blue dress sprinkled with almond blossoms. The heat was breathtaking. 'Are you *all* pregnant?' she asked. The teeth of a pretty child called Joanna were duly inspected. The British Media rushed to interview Joanna. I interviewed the wives, who all said, without being prompted, that their visitor looked too tired to last out the day.

As she climbed back into the thwacking helicopter, one could only agree. Her stamina is impressive but she is overly proud of it, and this trip she had pushed herself too far. Along with the punch-drunk British Media I strapped myself into the back-up helicopter and found myself hanging into space over an open door with Kowloon lying sideways underneath. If she felt half as bad as I did then the upcoming, all-important press conference was going to be a disaster.

In fact, it was her best yet. On the last day in Peking she had made a bad press conference worse by showing obvious impatience with the halting English of some of the Hong Kong Media. This propensity probably springs less from intolerance than from her urge to get cracking, but to possess it is a handicap and to indulge it is a grievous fault. Now, however, on the day that mattered, she kept her irascibility bottled up. She said all she could say, which was that an agreement had been reached that there should be an agreement, and that from here on in it was all down to the diplomats. When a Hong Kong girl reporter said that the question of renewing the lease could have simply been ignored, the Stateswoman turned a potential minus into a plus by insisting that a contract is a contract and the means of meeting it should be found early, 'in good time'. Clearly she spoke with conviction, from the deep core of her nature, where the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval has the force

of law. In Peking she had got away for a few minutes on her own in search of a bolt of fabric. The one she liked was too pricey at £39 a yard, so she had not bought it. Her passion for managing the household along sound lines was what got her elected in the first place, and was what now reassured the people of Hong Kong that things might just conceivably, in the long run, be going to be all right. On Hong Kong television the assembled pundits, posing in front of blown-up Thatcher glossies that looked like publicity stills of Eleanor Parker in *Return to Peyton Place*, began a long analysis of what little she had said, as if there could have been more. Next day the stock market dipped but there was no crash. When the rabbits had finished pulling out, the smart money would probably buy back in.

The smart money was there in force at the Government House reception. Chinese businessmen whose personal wealth made Powie look like a pauper were jostling to breathe the Dragon Lady's perfume. If her mission had been a flop then they would already have been in Acapulco, so the signs were favourable. I met such mighty Hong Kong *tai pans* as Mr Lee of real estate, Mr Fong of many boats, and the ineffable Sir Run Run Shaw, who had made a hill of money out of those terrible films in which bad actors kick each other. (In the days when he was plain Mister, Run Run invented a cinematic process called Shawscope, a version of the wide-screen ratio which allowed more actors to kick each other at the same time.) One after the other I asked all these characters whether they had been in Peking lately. It turned out that all of them had been spending a lot of time there. Mr Lee told me how much the Chinese leaders respected his honesty.

So the boys are smoothing the road to the inevitable. Only Sir Run Run had the check to say that if a new regime asked him to make a Socialist movie he would run-run for cover. Actually it is hard to see why he should be worried: his movies would be readily adaptable to Marxist-Leninist ideological content. Just make the bad guys the capitalists and the good guys could start kicking again straight away.

The Dragon Lady's VC-10 screamed out of Kai Tak like a fighter and banked steeply towards India. All RAF transport aircraft have the passenger seats facing backwards, so the British Media, once again confined to the rear of the aircraft, could see where they had been. Laden down with electronic devices and paper kites for the children, they were too tired to sleep. So was the Dragon Lady, but she had no choice. Soon it would be the Conservative Party Conference. It was time for another transformation. The cabin lights went out to denote that she had retired. Her mind stirred in the darkness, putting away China and putting on Britain, forgetting Zhao Ziang and remembering Francis Pym. She was turning herself back into a Party Leader. While she dreamed and the Media drank, I looked back through the window along the Road of Silk, the ancient trade route which brought Marco Polo to Cathay and the Land of Prester John, and which was already old when Chinese lacquer boxes were on sale in the markets of Imperial Rome.

As you might have gathered, I loved China. But Westerners have always loved China. In the last century they drugged her, stripped her naked, tied her hands above her head, and loved her as they pleased. We were lucky that a revolution was all that happened. If we are luckier still, the current bunch of Chinese gerontocrats will be smoothly replaced by a generation of intellectuals who were so appalled at the Cultural Revolution that they are now less frightened by democracy than by despotism. If that happens, the Chinese revolution might manage what the Soviet version so obviously can't - to civilise itself. Here, as in every other aspect of Chinese life, tradition is a comfort. China knew totalitarianism two hundred years before Christ, when the mad First Emperor of the Ch'in obliterated all memory of the ancient glory of Chou, burned the classical texts and put to death anybody caught reading the *Book of Songs*. But he unified the tribes, and on that strong base rose the majestic dynasty of Han, on whose era the Chinese of today still pride themselves, as will the Chinese of tomorrow.

In Delhi Mrs Thatcher had breakfast with Mrs Gandhi: a hen session. In Bahrain she shook hands with a sheik. At 34,000 feet over Europe she invited the Media forward for a drink. God knows what she thought of us: prominent in the front row of the scrum were at least two journalists who had been blotto since Peking. As for what we thought of her, the answer is not easy. Some had their prejudices confirmed. None thought less of her. I still wouldn't vote for her, because I favour the Third Way, the Way of Tao, in which the universal principle is made manifest through the interlocking forms of David Steel and Roy Jenkins.

But I had grown to admire her. She is what she is, and not another thing, and on such issues it is better to be crassly straight than subtly devious. Perhaps being haunted by the Falklands, where for want of a nail she was obliged to send many young men to their deaths, in the matter of Hong Kong she seemed determined to be well prepared. The business touches me personally, because on Hong Kong Island, in the war cemetery at Sai Wan Bay, my father has lain since 1945, cut down at the age of thirty-three because the British did not know how to avoid a war in the Pacific. If firm talk and a steely glance can stop that happening again, Mrs Thatcher is ideal casting. She deserves credit for her iron guts, even if you think her brains are made of the same stuff.

While thinking all this I was searching the cabin. He wasn't there. Finally I wangled an invitation to the flight deck. He wasn't there either. Powie was not at the controls. She had got away from him at last. As the VC-10 dived towards Heathrow the wings suddenly shone like water gardens. After ten days and a dozen countries it was raining for the first time. The Han dragons could control the rain but ours must have been too tired. She had just enough energy for the last transformation, into the mother of her children. Mr and Mrs Thatcher stepped down to embrace their son Mark, who had driven all the way from town without getting lost once.

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