

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

