

CHINA: Past and Present

By Bob Considine



The last time I saw China, her heart was old and gray. It was during the war, the one that was going on in 1945.

By 1945, China had been in war longer than any of the participants. She had been at war off and on with Japan since the official shutdown of the Sino-Japanese war in 1895. In 1931, Japan seized Manchuria (Manchukuo) and in 1937, the vicinity of Peiping (Peking).

The Japanese were stretched quite thin by the summer of 1945, when I first saw China. But they still held the main coastline cities. The Chinese government, headed by the Kuomintang, which was in turn headed by Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, claimed all the rest of the huge country.

There was another claimant, Mao Tse-tung's Chinese Communists, who were to prevail and chase Chiang and about 2 million of his faithful in 1947-1950. This jarred Washington. Washington thought that since "all Chinese look alike" they should think alike and live happily together through eternity. President Truman sent the man he most respected, Gen. George C. Marshall, to China to get the two forces together. Mao's people were pictured as "simple agrarians." A group of them was flown to San Francisco at the formation of the U.N. to show the world that they did not have horns and cloven feet.

Gen. Pat Hurley, our war-time Ambassador to China, had other views on Mao. When Teddy White, then head of Time's bureau in Chungking, asked his permission to visit Mao's headquarters — which was separate from Chiang's, though both were presumably fighting the Japanese invaders — Pat thundered "No!" Asked for a reason, the colorful old soldier, public servant, Senate hopeful and part-time diplomat, said:

"I'll tell you why! We've spent two billion dollars on Chiang in this war, and I'm not letting any of you reporters visit the other fellow and write a lot of sentimental hogwash about him and his crowd."

American reporters who have been in China since the Ping Pong detente have often commented on how law-abiding the people are today, under Communist rule and the Red-bound "thoughts" of Mao.

It wasn't that way in 1945. The country was destitute. The happy-go-lucky American servicemen were considered fair game. So was everything else that wasn't nailed down: like

the shoes and pants of exhausted airmen trying to sleep after unnerving supply fights over The Hump from India's Assam Valley to Kunming. One of the grander heists concerned the Gimo and Madam Chiang. The U.S. presented them with a special gussied-up C-47 (DC-3) executive model, with pretty curtains, deep rug, soft seats, office, communications equipment. It was flown over The Hump to Kunming too late in the day to fly on to Chungking for formal presentation. Chungking's airport was a short job carved out of the side of a hill, and no place for a night (or day, really) landing.

So Chiang, to be sure that nobody meddled with the plane, which was named Mei Ling, for the first lady, sent his armed honor guard to Kunming to guard it overnight.

The next morning it lay there, stripped. Even the springs had been pulled out of the seats, for every scrap of metal or fabric could be sold or bartered at that time.

Who stripped it?
The honor guard.

There will be no chance for the President to probe very deeply into China. His schedule is tight and it will keep him confined mostly to Peking for five of his seven-day visit.

I find that a pity. I'd like to see some of the places I saw toward the end of the big war — when China was the first initial of an enormous theater

of war called the CBI — for China, Burma, India.

The American troops and the news guys who roamed that beat liked China the best of the three. Lord knows, it was uncomfortable, the food was generally lousy and the prices incredible. It was almost easy to generalize about the people of all categories and classes: they were good-natured thieves. The Burmese were too humble or pious to steal very much; the Indians — except those in the bazaars and gem stores — too fearful of pale faced foreigners.

The Chinese maintained their good nature and larcenous traits no matter how badly they were used by the Americans, or in the behalf of the Americans. Occasionally, somebody in the American command would complain to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek that the thieves of our goods must be punished. A token thief (there was always some question of whether he really was guilty) would be dragged into a provincial square and a militiaman would lop off one or both of his hands with a sword. Many of the spectators would break into loud giggling and press handkerchiefs or rags to their mouths so as not to be impolite.

President Nixon would like Sian, the ancient capital of China. It has wonderfully wide streets, though a couple of thousand years old. The shopkeepers and householders along the streets watered them with pride when I was there.

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