

Peking Duck

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes I wonder if I was a Communist dupe.

The visit I made to the People's Republic of China in 1978 to research Peking Duck was highly romantic and exciting (although hardly as exciting as the one in the book). Kind of like certain L.A. nightclubs in the Eighties, it was very difficult to get into Red China then, and you felt exclusive just to be there, even if the "in" crowd was a couple of social workers and an unemployed political organizer from the Valley. Once I was there, as far as I could tell, there was only one other tour group in the entire country, an Ethiopian volleyball team. We just happened to run into them at the Great Wall, and days later at a fishing commune in Manchuria.

When I got back, I went around giving shows of my slides, informing my bourgeois/bohemian audiences not quite, a la Lincoln Steffens, that "I have seen the future and it works," but something more like a sly "There's something of value here." What I meant was that it felt good, was good for the soul and was psychologically liberating, to be in a collective, non-competitive environment. Like many people at the time, I tried to ignore, or at least down-play, the totalitarian aspects, although they were hard to avoid. Indeed, they were pervasive and, again like many people, I did feel a sense of relief upon returning home, as if I had just been released from a continent-sized jail. I felt the same sense of relief when I returned from subsequent trips to Cuba and the Soviet Union.

Peking Duck was the first of three Moses Wine books I wrote taking the hero out of Los Angeles. They were deliberate attempts to break the conventional Chandler-Hammett form, in this case via a mock Murder on the Orient Express set on a radical-chic tour of the PRC. On those terms, I think I succeeded. Looking back, I also believe Peking Duck gives a vivid picture of what it was like for Americans to tour China in the Seventies when it was just beginning to open to the West. It may be unique in that regard.

Roger L. Simon
Los Angeles, CA