

May 10, 2013, WTE column. Editor's headline: "A tale of two Chinas"

In Beijing, Qi is one of 20 million inhabitants. To purchase her apartment would cost five hundred thousand dollars, she tells me. Already the rent has increased 15 percent from the year before.

We were visiting friends in a small town to the north when Qi inquired about buying an apartment in their complex. It would mean a 90-minute train-and-subway commute to her job.

"I wouldn't qualify," she told me afterwards. "Can't get a residence permit. I don't work here."

A residence permit?"

"Without it, the banks wouldn't loan me the money. I'd have to raise it privately. We don't own that kind of cash."

At the hotel in Xi'an, able to check-in at 10 AM, we gratefully freshened up. There, too, the heat was off, but the weather was warmer than in Beijing, and hot water ran from tap and shower. We toured the city, hoofing it to various bus stations. Tomorrow we would visit the Terracotta Warriors. Constructed three thousand years ago, they were to protect their emperor in the afterworld.

Xi'an advertises itself as "Happy Paradise." If happiness comes flush with cash, its merchants and promoters must be wildly happy: beaucoup bucks roll their way daily. Yet they seem driven to dream up ever bigger spectacles, which can't help but eat up the profits and, along the way, diminish the Warriors' significance.

Xi'an, known in ancient times as Chang'an, is one of the four most ancient capitals in the world, "the hometown of Chinese civilization." UNESCO lists it as a world cultural heritage site; its Terracotta Museum is deemed "the eighth wonder of the world" and "one of the ten most popular tourist attractions in China." Indeed, plenty of Chinese crowded its temples and museums, though it was only April.

The Warriors with their human characteristics were strangely affecting. Seeing some broken ones being dug up, I felt a pang of grief akin to viewing a human skeleton. Yet nowhere was there a hint of the human cost of their manufacture, the slave labor at those long-ago kilns and in clay pits. Considering the communist emphasis on the dignity of labor, I thought the omission puzzling.

Similar feelings swept over me in the ostentatious Buddhist temples, so pompous with gold décor and gilded statues, they brought to mind Vatican City. In view of China's Cultural Revolution with its all-out destruction of religious and cultural artifacts, I pondered the golden Buddhas. Had they been buried during the Mao regime and recently dug up? More

likely, they were manufactured but lately, along with “ancient” city walls and bell towers. Well, in Germany, too, war-destroyed castles were rebuilt stone by marble stone, regardless of their former occupants’ brutal exploits.

Some Xi’an tourist attractions are unabashedly recent. City parks feature countless bronze statues, not of valiant workers but of broad-shouldered commanders on horseback or high-rising thrones. Often, a lower ring of flag-bearing or music-making minions looks up admiringly.

At night, Xi’an treated us to spectacular laser-light shows and “dancing” water fountains, each advertised as the biggest in the world. Each show goes on nightly for twenty minutes, free of charge. My companions were enthralled but I couldn’t help think that the electricity used in these extravaganzas would easily heat Beijing for a week. Considering China’s chronic water shortages (in a Beijing park, I talked with an English-speaking Chinese journalist on his government’s mismanagement of water), the conspicuous consumption was disturbing.

Then there’s the nonstop loud music, Western pop or traditional Chinese, blaring from upscale shoe stores to KFCs and Papa Johns. On sidewalk and near museum entrances, hawkers relentlessly pitch trinkets, bottled water, fast food. Even in jam-packed trains, vendors peddle their wares, pushing their carts through the masses.

Xi’an, city of eight million, impressed me as the quintessence of late-acquired, ruthless capitalism combined with sixty-five years of equally ruthless communism. Ditto Beijing.

Retirement at age fifty-five is loudly enforced in China, to make way for young people who need jobs. On retiring, everyone is granted a pension, provided she or he has worked for at least fifteen years, plus healthcare and housing subsidies. Qi tells me, her company shells out about \$850 per month in payroll taxes toward her eventual retirement. She also says, retirees are hired clandestinely, avoiding the payroll tax.

“Playgrounds” exist in every park, replete with all manner of exercise equipment and group activities, free for young and old. Qi’s parents don’t partake, preferring to watch television or play computer games. Their daughter comes home for lunch; they cook and do the housework. In spite of free healthcare, they’ve neglected their teeth.

Every morning Qi participates in an hour or more of group T’ai Chi, in a park that takes fifteen minutes of powerwalking to reach. Returning home, she changes into work clothes and hoofs it to her job. Sometimes she puts in a few hours on Saturdays and/or Sundays—after a morning of T’ai Chi.