

THE GREAT CALL OF CHINA

THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION INSTIGATED BY MAO IN THE 1960s SUBSTANTIALLY DAMAGED CHINA'S HERITAGE. DESPITE THIS, SAYS ALISTAIR McALPINE, AN ABUNDANCE OF TREASURES REMAINS, PULLING MORE CROWDS THAN EVER

In 1975 China may well have seemed a strange place to Europeans, but only half as strange as Europeans seemed to Chinese. At that time Western travellers were beginning to filter in to the country. A European walking down the street in Beijing, for instance, might get the sensation they were being followed – only to turn and see a crowd of a hundred trailing them. That crowd would then start applauding loudly. Even domestic tourists from far-flung ports of China, who wore flamboyant regional costumes, stood out among the throngs of Mao-suited Chinese.

Most of China's museums were then closed, those years being the tail end of the Cultural Revolution. When asked why a particular museum included in an old-fashioned guidebook was not open to visitors, the Chinese would reply: 'We are rearranging history.' Museums that did accept travellers had displays of crude wax figures, representing evil rulers stealing milk from mothers with babes in arms, for their own consumption.

During one visit to The Forbidden City, giving my guide the slip among the crush of people crowding banquet halls and temples, I found a small garden not much bigger than a good-sized drawing room from an English country house. In this bare space were a dozen blue-and-white vases arranged in two rows. Each one was filled with water and exotic goldfish, and attended by a pair of women holding bamboo scoops, who would lift water out of the vases and let it drop back through the air from a height. The Forbidden City also contained a large collection of clocks and automatons, which, arranged in no particular order, spanned several centuries. Its quality ranged from the great mechanical clocks of James Cox made in the 18th century to the banal efforts of the early 20th century. The Chinese authorities were not much interested in showing travellers to their temples, palaces and museums; rather they concentrated on steel, gas and public works as well as schools and hospitals.

By the beginning of the 1980s, tourists were not uncommon, particularly visitors from Taiwan, who stood out because of their expensive clothes, cameras and cosmetics. Museums had been rearranged and were open to visitors, the great marvels of China were being dug up and the gardens of Suzhou were largely open. Only then, when the country's mask slipped, did the true nature of its vast resources of art and culture become apparent.

Today China is prominent in the art world in many areas, with literally dozens of shows that range from a whistle kite museum to the Terracotta Army and the Shanghai Museum. The Forbidden City has been restored as a wonder of the world. Books on China's art abound and there are many useful guidebooks. Possibly the best of them is *China: Museums*. Written by Miriam Clifford, Cathy Giangrande and Antony White, it describes 200 of the country's museums, including many of the lesser-known ones. For a visit to China this volume is indispensable, while for those at home, reading it is a joy. China now throngs with tourists; visitors come for pleasure or profit. It would, however, be wonderful to imagine that the daughters of the ladies I saw in 1975 spooning water for the goldfish in the Forbidden City's hidden garden were still at work. Perhaps they are, for China has lost none of its mystery ■

