

It never ceases to amaze me how China is changing. My first experience with China stems from when I was a student at Beida (Peking University) in 1981-82. The importance of first impressions and a year spent in wonder and awe could be the reason that this picture tends to remain my frame of reference for China.

中国的变化给我带来惊喜可以说是无穷的。我与中国第一次接触始于北大，1981-82年我在这里留学。第一印象，我在头一年中获得的惊喜和敬畏的重要性在于这将成为我今后对中国的参考框架。后来我每一次来中国，而每一次这里的变化给我带来的震

动都会更大，有时简直到不可调和的地步，这就造成了我的脑海里有两个中国：当前一个中国和前一年的中国。人生一世经历如此巨变，我如何面对它？而如果我的困惑已经如此之强烈，那么中国人又如何来应变这里发生的一切？

A tale of two cities: lifestyle transformation

文化异同：双城记

by Gwendolyn Tate

With every visit to China, the difference becomes bigger, sometimes to the point of being irreconcilable. This has resulted in there being two Chinas in my mind: the present one and the former one – and now and then they meet. Such a difference, and all in less than a lifetime - how does one deal with this? And by this I mean, if I have trouble with this, how do people in China deal with this amazing change? One can say that what has happened during roughly the last 35 years constitutes nothing less than the largest transformation in lifestyle in human history.

These are big words, but let me try to explain this by telling a tale of two cities: Xi'an past and present.

Xi'an is situated in China's ancient heartland where Qin Shi Huangdi proclaimed the first capital of the united China of 221 BC. The first emperor is now best known for his terracotta warriors that guard his burial mound. It is a misunderstanding that China was a sealed off country. Xi'an or Chang'an (Long-lasting Peace) as it was called, was the starting point - or the end, depending how you look at it

- of the Silk Road. Through the Silk Road, the name of a number of tracks that constituted the route from the Mediterranean to China - or vice versa; goods such as silk, iron, bronze, lacquer ware all traveled westward, while glass, gold and silver, spices, gems, wool and linen went eastward. Inventions were carried back and forth; the chariot from the West, gunpowder, printing and the stirrup from China. Also religions such as Buddhism, Islam, Nestorianism and Jainism traveled and deeply influenced societies.



Xi'an was China's capital for more than twelve hundred years. It was one of the most powerful world cities, comparable with Athens and Rome at their height. The city planning dates from the 6th century: a grid like a chessboard with city walls (37 km in length) and broad boulevards, a model for ancient Chinese cities such as Luoyang and Beijing.

So much for Xi'an's illustrious past. In the early 1980s, apart from the city grid and the ramparts, not much reminded me of this past. It was a typical Chinese provincial city - drab, run-down and monotonous. Soviet-style office blocks and half-empty department stores lined the streets. On the pavements were some street vendors, peasants from the countryside with baicai and wormy apples. Jeeps, buses and bicycles filled the streets and people were a mass of blue and green Mao suits. Coal dust filled the air, with its typically penetrating but not unpleasant smell - that is, not for me, as it triggered nostalgic feelings...

Xi'an in 2014 - is this the same city? The ramparts revamped - now tourists cycle on the ancient walls through the dust and pollution. Eight-lane highways, lined by endless shopping malls and glass



and marble office buildings, gouge through the city grid.

Huge ads shout for attention, many featuring well-known Western brands. The Ming dynasty bell tower stands alone as a safe haven in an incessant stream of traffic. People hurry past, dressed in the latest Chinese fashions with iPods in their ears, carrying shopping bags of - again - famous brands. Street vendors sell knickknacks but also exotic fruits and all kinds of street food.

If only the appearance of a city and the way people live undergoes such a massive change, what does it do to the minds of people? How does one cope when being impelled from a time of poverty and a simple life to an era where choices and opportunities abound but where the line between winners and losers is also very clearly drawn? What about the younger generation that has little or no knowledge

of even very recent times and can only relate to the present, materialistic world?

There are no simple answers to this but it is worth thinking about. As always, when it concerns China, the scale is staggering. So is the largest transformation of lifestyle in human history.

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As a Sinologist in an international business environment, Gwendolyn Tates has for many years focused on dealing with cultural differences when doing business in China. While her company, ChinaWays, specializes in intercultural training programmes, she also finds time to teach Chinese language and culture at two universities of applied science and at a high school.