©1997 Margaret E. Davis

World beat: Beijing

Long distance information

In a place where communications and the media are often problematic, Margaret E. Davis twiddles the cultural dials

By Margaret E. Davis

Within 24 hours of flying into Beijing I'm at the Keep in Touch Café waiting for the band to go on. Tonight's performance—featuring Chinese bands Catcher in the Rye and Cobra—consists of Cure covers. Only Cure covers. Riff for riff, beat for beat, the players set forth perfect matches of the tunes. If I close my eyes, I can sense Robert Smith onstage. Opening them again, I see the lead singer— hair sprayed as high as straight Asian hair can go—pogoing and belting out the lyrics, which are probably most of the English he knows.

"Where do they learn this stuff?" I ask, knowing that the shops' Western music selection ranges from Michael Jackson, say, to Michael Bolton. Once I spotted a copy of *The Wall* and almost jumped up and down.

"Notched tapes from Guangzhou," a friend tells me. Customs officials "destroy" bootleg tapes and CDs (most from factories in southern China) by punching notches in them. Naturally, the battle-wounded objects of the intellectual property war wind up in back alleys anyway. You lose the last song on the CD, you repair the tape: everyone snaps up the recordings at about ¥15, almost $2, apiece.

The best place to buy illegal CDs is in Tianjin, on its famous Ancient Culture Street. While tourists haggle over teapots, kites, jade, and fake antique snuff bottles, the Chinese flip through sidewalk arrays of music offered by teenage vendors—the widest selection this side of Hong Kong— from Frente! and German recordings of Nirvana live in Europe to solid Chinese rock and Hong Kong sugar pop.

Keeping in touch

A club with a well-laid stone floor, marble ashtrays, and sturdy wood furniture, the Keep in Touch is an outpost of the burgeoning Beijing nightlife scene. The Chinese government introduced the two-day weekend a few years ago, and suddenly people had more leisure. Given the newly vaunted "market socialist system," many Chinese found the means to enjoy it.

Perhaps the hippest addition so far to Beijing nightlife is the Qiao Niao ("Pretty Bird"—those who read Chinese will know *qiao* really means "ugly"). A converted bomb shelter in the northern part of town, this place, originally intended to shield people from foreign elements, now attracts them.

A labyrinth of spiderlike corridors leads to some dozen rooms, each with its own theme. One has chairs swinging fro the ceiling by ropes; another is decorated with smiley-face paper lanterns and tiles carved with likenesses of crickets. Sipping drafts of Beijing beer, listening to a tape of Spearhead and Us3, we seem to feel the world shrink.

Another nightlife venue is the San Wei teahouse. By day a tranquil spot for sipping exotic teas, on weekend nights the place packs out for a jazz show, with band members half expatriate and half Chinese. One night at San Wei I see the first gig of a band out to play African music. The seven members are Chinese, Madagascan, Ugandan, Australian, and Indian. The Chinese in the audience furrow their brows, at first absorbing the new beats. A song or so later toes are tapping.

A place like Pretty Bird would have been unthinkable even five years ago. Ten years ago, the Chinese government and the people both commonly referred to non-Chinese people, especially Westerners, as "foreign devils." Now, we're called *waiguoren* (literally "outside country people"). Probably one of the more xenophobic people (remember, they built a 3,000-mile wall to keep out invaders), most Chinese still think in terms of us and them. The characters for "China," *zhong* and *guo*, signify "middle country." Thus the Chinese are seen as central, with everything else in orbit around them. Ticket prices at museums, parks, or airports are significantly more if you don't have an Asian face.

Here, Communist Party officials (oops, I mean "market socialists") drive Mercedes, flaunt their wealth, and pull *guanxi* (connections) to get their kids free tutoring, obtain places at the university, and avoid paying import taxes on Western-made luxury goods. Then there are the businessmen who negotiate on cell phones while commuting to work by bike. The poor but status-conscious can buy fake phones to play along.

The number of cell phones here is expected to reach 10 million by the end of the year (20 million by the turn of the century), but for now undoubtedly the most popular way to telecommunicate is by pager. You cannot spend five minutes in Beijing without hearing a beeper go off. It's annoying at the movies, a cacophony on the subway, and a major topic of conversation everywhere. But since it takes a couple of years and quite a bit of bribe money to get a home phone line installed (if your landlord ever approves it), the Chinese are impelled to buy beepers.

Unlike Western models, with each beeper having a separate phone number, *huji* are assigned extension numbers; to call a friend you have to dial into a beeper station, where the operator (often a surly woman, voice thick with sleep from a morning or afternoon or evening nap) takes down your information: the extension that you're calling, your *gui xing* (your "expensive name," or last name), and your telephone number. If you're foreign, you need to be fluent with Chinese numbers because, if the *fuwutai* can't understand you, she'll just hang up.

The information (including your gender) is relayed by code to your friend. Most pagers don't have Chinese characters, so names are input according to some odd relationship between sounds and numbers: Ma is C3, Liu is 4D—I can't explain this; neither can the Chinese people I ask. The information is sent twice, in case the page isn't received the first time; this way, pagees can't say they never got the message.

If you're paged, you're expected to return the call within minutes. Meanwhile callers may be standing around at a desk or stall on the sidewalk where a line's been strung up in a tree and a little old lady sits drinking tea and eavesdropping, making handfuls of yuan by the hour (average cost of a call: three *mao* or three-tenths of a *kuai* (the Chinese dollar, equivalent to about 4 cents). Sometimes there's a crowd hovering around the phone waiting for people to call back. The phone rings, and everyone lurches toward it.

Chinese communications are complicated. IF the person you called doesn't call back, " they'd better have a good excuse. A popular one is that the battery went low on your tamade, or "damn," beeper; another is that you lost the thing. Once a friend who'd never called me back offered this, weeks afterward: "Oh! I'm sorry I didn't call you! I … broke my leg."

Cross currents

Those connections grouped under the term *guanxi* are probably one of the most important elements of Chinese culture. You always have your personal network, which can be tapped into by good friends and relatives (although this increases the *guanxi* debt twofold— to the person who did the favor as well as to the person who helped to find the person who did the favor). Everywhere, whether favors or information or permission slips, comes down to *guanxi*.

I have friend who's a professional clarinet player. He teaches a student all year for free—just so he can buy a train ticket home to Sichuan for the Chinese New Year. The student's parents work for the Railway Ministry. My friend still pays for the ticket, mind you—but at least he's allowed to buy one. He considers the deal a godsend.

I recently found an apartment through a friend of mine, for which I pay an exorbitant (by Chinese standards) amount of money. But the housing supply is so short (and the obstacles facing foreigners seeking local housing so great) that I feel lucky to have found a place. So I pay an American-size rent for a tenement-style apartment. On top of that, I teach English to my friend's boss's daughter for free. That's *guanxi*.

So why do I bother? Why come to live in a polluted place where people's eyes burn holes into me as I ride the subway, where it's sometimes impossible to buy train tickets unless I know the right people, where most cabdrivers, as my Chinese friends say, have "big black hearts" and try to rip you off enough to prove it?

Perhaps because I've never known such a fascinating place. To live here is to experience daily ironies. There are traditions that date back a few thousand years, and there are new influences that alternately clash and complement. In China, the new and the old are confused, co-opted, and blending into a heady mix. Once, I saw a wobbly pyramid of computer monitors moving up the street. When I came closer, I saw that they were being transported on top of bicycle car, powered by a peasant in a faded blue Mao suit.

Meanwhile, wannabe punker boys grimace on the buses when little kids call them *ayi* ("auntie"), thrown off by the punks' long hair.

The famous and very talented Cui Jian, China's rock-and-roll star, is said to like listening to hip-hop from the West. His music is a thoroughly listenable, thunderous rock, combining instruments from Peking Opera, lots of guitars, and Cui's distinctively angry vocals. Having played at Tiananmen Square during the protests, he is now watched constantly by the police. Their quandary is that Cui is too famous to imprison, yet threatens to be too popular to allow him to be heard on recordings. "Sometimes I can play. Sometimes I can't," Cui recently told a Western newspaper reporter.

With the virtual silencing of Cui Jian, rock music has come to symbolize rebellion. A Chinese rock fan is antiestablishment by definition. Here, rock retains the power of an ideology, a frisson of danger. And this stubborn countering of official culture takes place against a backdrop of tradition, the fine details of which are magnified for foreigners.

In the evening I leave my shift at what is probably China's only independently owned English-language newspaper. I set off on my Golden Lion bicycle, past groups of old men taking their pet birds out for a sing, people drinking beer and arguing at sidewalk restaurants, Mao's big portrait beaming down from the wall of the Forbidden City.

I can feel a spring wind cold on my knuckles and the sweat along my spine. Except for the rattle of a few late buses, the night is quiet save for the sense of 13 million people sleeping.

Art accompanying story: photos by Margaret S. Davis

Printed in Puncture*, mid-1997, and excerpted in the* Utne Reader, *December 1997*