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She'll Always Have Beijing

By Michael Miner

A really great job in journalism beats any job in the world, and you'll happily shoulder the misery that always comes with it.

For the sake of her terrific job, Margaret Davis lived illegally in a firetrap tenement high-rise and trudged up and down six flights of stairs because the woman who ran the elevator would have turned her in in an eyeblink. She took the roundabout way to her newspaper every day because she assumed she was being followed. And every few weeks her office changed locations.

That was life in Beijing. "I had the best job I've ever had," she says. "I loved jumping on my bike every day. I loved that work. There are 13 million people in that city, and they all want to know what movie's playing."

In February 1997 Davis, then 29, flew to China to take over as managing editor of *Beijing Scene*, an English-language biweekly that said where to go and what to do. Its publisher was a former UPI reporter named Scott Savitt, who'd been in China forever. Savitt and Davis went from black and white to full color, from 12 pages to 40, from biweekly to weekly, from free to 10 yuan, or $1.20 an issue. *Beijing Scene* turned into what Davis calls an "economic powerhouse."

If you knew English "and had a pocketful of yuan to burn on the good life, you were probably a reader," says Davis. "We printed about 10,000 copies," she says, "but our ad department said we had a readership of 100,000. We did have a huge pass-along rate. They were like sacred items, a totally useful resource. We finally went to paid because students would pick up piles of the papers and sell them on campuses, and we thought we'd rather make that money instead of them."

For a couple of months after Davis arrived *Beijing Scene* operated out in the open. But even though the paper steered clear of politics, a little attitude goes a long way under a dictatorship. "We sometimes threw quotes around Taiwan 'province,' described Inner Mongolia as the 'part of traditional Mongolia under Chinese control,' and slyly joked about Hong Kong returning to 'the motherland's embrace,'" Davis recalls.

"We were being satirical and smart and funny in a place where that attitude was in short supply," she says. The Westerners liked that kind of stuff, and so did Chinese readers who could see beyond Beijing's smog-draped horizon. As for the authorities, Davis figured their English was so bad they'd never catch on. "That is the kind of sarcasm that goes right over the heads of Chinese officials."

Except that a couple months after she took over, those officials showed up. They pulled up in a black Mercedes and trooped into the *Beijing Scene* office. As they came in the front door, every Chinese member of the staff disappeared out the back. They'd all come to Beijing from the provinces looking for work, and none of them had residence permits. Davis didn't have one either, which is why she lived furtively in a tenement, but to her, being sent home didn't seem quite so terrifying.

Savitt offered the visitors tea and chatted with them in Mandarin for a couple of hours. What were they like? I ask Davis. "They were sort of like middle-class businessmen," she says. "Ill-fitting suit jackets, nice haircuts—they obviously weren't peasants or anything. But kind of sleazy." She says they'd get up from time to time, saunter the length of the office, studying copies of the newspapers and staring jealously at *Beijing Scene*'s modern computers.

The officials left. But they came back. "There would always be four or five of these guys," Davis says. "It was like a big posse. There was a chill in the room when they walked in. Even if you didn't see them come in you had to look up, because the environment had changed. And suddenly none of the Chinese people were around. They'd have slipped out the back door to take a long lunch or something."

Davis thinks it wasn't the smart-alecky tone of *Beijing Scene* that brought the authorities. It was the prosperity. "All the government-run English-language papers were just awful. When we came along, people were just running to us to sign up for long [advertising] contracts. Our advertising rates were just amazing."

These were the high-end advertisers, she says—airlines, hotels, bars and restaurants, consulting firms, Volvo. "That was probably our biggest mistake—being too successful. Our government-run competitors got really worried."

One day the usual faces arrived at the newspaper accompanied by an imposing-looking man in a blue uniform. When they left, Savitt called a meeting. "He said, 'In 24 hours we're out of here. Don't even show up tomorrow. Take your computer'—we all had these little Apple PowerBooks. 'And we'll call you with our new address.'"

So *Beijing Scene* went underground. It moved three times in a month. The new spaces were off alleys, and there wasn't a sign on the door. The authorities never did find the floating newsroom, but a month later they tracked down the separate advertising office and "confiscated as many computers as they could carry." *Beijing Scene* was out of business.

Davis, a *Reader* editor in 1993 and '94, had spent 1996 in Beijing studying bookbinding. *Beijing Scene* was a "ragtag" newspaper then, launched by Savitt in a bedroom a few months before, but when Davis returned to the States she remembered it. "I was so lonesome back here," she says. "I felt, 'This is boring.' Every minute was an adventure over there." So she wrote Savitt and asked for a job.

When the paper went under she'd had enough. "It was such a high. And when it was shut down, it was, 'Well, why do I want to live here?' I could stay. I could work in PR. But that's not what I came to China for, to be a flack. I don't want to spend this much energy living in a rat hole and keeping a job that doesn't keep me busy. I might as well go home."

Savitt stayed in China. He's tried to start up again at least three times, Davis says, and each time the government has shut him down. According to his Web site (www.beijingscene.com), the next launch date is April 1. Savitt wants her back. "I wouldn't go back to get shut down again," she says. "If it were a sure thing—which China can never deliver—I would go."

She's now an editor for a law firm in Portland, Oregon, and life's less exciting than it was. There was the night when Britain had just turned Hong Kong over to China, and Tiananmen Square filled with people from all over China waving flags and taking pictures. Colonialism was dead, the West had pulled out, and jubilation reigned. But one man came up to Davis and said softly, "These people don't know what happened here. But we Beijingers remember what happened, and our hearts hurt." Then he vanished.

The government that brought in tanks and opened fire in 1989 had just closed Davis's newspaper, so she felt a modest kinship with the stranger. "Your heart goes out to people who want the system to change and maybe were helping it to during the student movement," she says. "But the people in power are the ones with the army. Chinese officials don't have the confidence to let there be a free press. They would be exposed as the buffoons they are."

Art accompanying story in printed newspaper: Margaret Davis photo by Margaret S. Davis

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