

# CHINA FACES CHANGE

By Liveryman John Dunston

**CHINA. THE MIDDLE KINGDOM.** It had seemed for so long an impossible dream.

Then, in 1989, the school choir which I conducted in London, the Bancroft's Singers, received an invitation to give a series of five concerts – in Beijing, Xi'an, Shanghai and Canton. After two years of preparation, fund-raising and wishful thinking, the choral tour took place successfully, ending on 15 April 1989.

That significant date also saw the death of Hu Yaobang, the former Party Chairman and Secretary. Immediately, students started public mourning in Tiananmen Square, and the events that followed, leading up to 4 June, are only too well known. Hu had undoubtedly contributed to the climate of reform, but was seen at that stage by the authorities as largely responsible for the mood of student unrest and bourgeois liberalisation.

The following year, I was awarded a Winston Churchill Travelling Fellowship, which made it possible for me to spend two months in China in 1991, working with children's choirs and orchestras in seventeen cities. A journey of that length, covering eleven thousand kilometres and involving travel by train, plane, steamer, taxi, hydrofoil, bus, pedicab and, of course, bicycle, naturally took in much more than music alone, though in my visits to over sixty primary and secondary schools and Conservatories of Music, that was the truly international language, and the starting point for much further contact.

Not so many years ago, the repertoire of any school choir in the People's Republic would have consisted largely of songs with titles like: "China – I love you", "Young Pioneers love the workers", or (a jolly number in which I conducted the eighty-strong students' choir of the Sichuan Conservatory of Music in Chengdu) "The lot of the peasants is always improving in the new-look China".

Music – indeed, the arts in general – existed to serve and usually glorify the Party and the system.

How different it all is now. Gone, at least in the cities, are the identical blue Mao suits except among the elderly. Gone from the street are the Little Red Books and the innumerable portraits and statues of the Great Helmsman himself. And gone from the schools is the narrow insistence on Party-line music. Instead, I found there an almost breathless rush to absorb Western music, to pass it on to the current generation of pupils, to benefit immediately from the climate made possible by the far-reaching educational reforms of the 1980s. At the Yangpu District Middle Arts School in Shanghai, the charismatic Head, Chen Jin Yuan, is also conductor of the outstanding choir of thirty, and made the point to me clearly that the task ahead, for this and future generations, to raise the level of musical and artists achievement, is immense: here was one of the movers of modern China among ordinary people, who, as long as the clouds remain parted, will take up any challenge for the benefit of his young people.

My journey had begun in the capital, Beijing, and continued in the bitterly cold north-eastern city of Harbin, swept by Siberian winds and famous for its Ice Sculpture Festival lasting through the winter. Here at the Children's Palace was an opportunity to hear both choral and orchestral music from the Chinese and Western traditions. It was indicative of the extraordinarily high standard that would be shown by so many of the thousands of children that I was to meet and work with in China.

In Tangshan (twinned with Lincoln), the Kailuan Civil Engineering Company No.13 Middle School put on a magnificent performance of heroic mining music by the choir of sixteen-year-olds; in nearby Yangquan (reached after three hair-raising hours in a Foreign Affairs Office car hurtling over the potholes in

what passed, just, as a road), the students at the Vocational School spend each morning on their core curriculum of Chinese, Maths, and Science, before training for several hours every afternoon in the performance of Chanxi Provincial Opera, developing the highest level of skill in both vocal music and the stylised acting and athleticism required for a Chinese operatic career. This field of traditional culture has only recently become available again, having been banished for so long as a symbol of the "old", pre-Revolution China. And how the young people are seizing the opportunities now available.

Early in the tour, I gave a seminar for students at the Shenyang Conservatory, training to be music teachers. Shortly before, I had spent time with their teacher, Professor Wang Kejian, as he rehearsed his choir at the Children's Palace, and at home with his family. He spoke at length about his own study and his teacher Professor Lai Guang Yi, now in Canton and one of the most highly respected children's choir trainers in China. I was able to meet Professor Lai later in the tour, and attend some of his remarkable rehearsals, sensing almost a family tree in the development of choral training. The roots appeared in Shanghai, where, by chance, I met Ma Ge Shun, an eighty year old retired Professor of Music, who had taught Lai Guang Yi himself. In his twilight years, he was now conducting again, this time a church choir in Shanghai, having suffered extreme persecution in less happy times as an intellectual, a musician and a Christian. Yet somehow, his spirit had survived, and he could at least see some sanity returning to his country after years of madness.

The aim of the Churchill Fellowships, a living memorial to Sir Winston, has been to enable people from all walks of life to travel abroad, to share their own experience and to learn in the country concerned. I am hoping that choirs in schools in this country will now be able to establish links with their counterparts in China.

It is now possible for Chinese opera to flourish, for the beauty of Chinese folksong to be heard again, for a revival in the study of traditional Chinese instrumental music to take place, after all had been effectively forbidden for so long. This positive change has accompanied some growth in religious freedom and a marked improvement in the quality of life in both city and countryside (whose inhabitants make up over 80% of the population). Economically, the pace of development in China appears now almost uncontrollable. The future looks uncertain in so many ways, and one can only hope that the years ahead will not hold unexpected trouble. The children of the next generation are eager and ready to play their part both culturally and more widely in a world which must make itself ready to receive them.



'Conducting the choir of the Guangdong Province Experimental Middle School.'