

CHINA

Alive
in the
Bitter
Sea

苦海余生

Fox
Butterfield

The New York Times
First Peking Bureau Chief

*To the memory of my mother,
Elizabeth Eaton Butterfield,
And to my father,
Lyman Henry Butterfield*

PREFACE

If, as the Chinese say, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, this book had its origin in the now dimly remembered crisis over the islands of Quemoy and Matsu in 1958. In August of that year Mao Zedong had ordered the bombardment of these two outposts occupied by the Chinese Nationalists, and there was fear the Eisenhower administration might be drawn into war with Peking because of the Mutual Security Treaty between Taiwan and the United States. I was about to begin my sophomore year at Harvard, and the controversy over the “offshore islands” impelled me to attend a lecture by Professor John K. Fairbank. Fairbank, a tall, spare man with a passionate commitment to the study of China and a dry, ironic wit, told the audience that China had 800 million people and an ancient history—and therefore it was a country to be taken seriously.

On the surface this seemed a simplistic thesis, but as Fairbank expounded it, I began to appreciate that here was the oldest nation on earth, with the largest number of people, and I knew nothing about it. I decided to sit in on Social Sciences 111, an introduction to the history of China, Japan, and Southeast Asia then taught by Fairbank and Edwin O. Reischauer (three years later, President Kennedy named Reischauer as his ambassador to Tokyo). It turned out to be the beginning of a romance that has lasted over two decades; I was infatuated with China. I still couldn’t pronounce Chinese names correctly. But when we read Edgar Snow’s account of the Communists’ epic Long March in the 1930s, *Red Star Over China*, I instinctively felt attracted to Mao and his followers for the hope and idealism they offered China after the misery and corruption of the Kuomintang period.

The next spring, when final exam time came, I enclosed a stamped, self-addressed postcard with my blue test booklet, in keeping with Harvard practice. The card came back with a summons to report to Fairbank’s office. What had I done wrong? I wondered as I walked to Widener Library at the appointed hour.

“You wrote a wonderful exam,” Fairbank said, to my relief. “Have you

considered Chinese studies as a career? You ought to begin studying Chinese."

I was flattered. I didn't yet know that Fairbank, the proselytizer, tried this routine out on almost anyone eccentric enough to show an interest in his field. And so that summer I did start studying Chinese. It was still such an obscure subject that the next fall when I asked for Chinese tapes at the Harvard languages laboratory the matronly looking woman behind the desk peered at me over the top of her glasses as if I had stumbled into the wrong church. "Chinese? Chinese?" she repeated. "Isn't Chinese a dead language?"

But each new course I took drew me deeper. I wrote my senior thesis on an unlikely group of American missionaries in north China who at the beginning of World War Two cooperated with the Communists, also attracted by their ideals and reform-minded policies. When I graduated in 1961, I journeyed to Taiwan on a Fulbright Fellowship to try to improve my spoken Chinese. There I lived with a Chinese family, discovered the joys of real Chinese food, and began to learn about how the Chinese social universe differs from ours. Later I went back to Harvard for five years for graduate work in Chinese history and then returned to Taiwan again in 1967 to do research on my doctoral dissertation.

By now, however, it was the height of the American war in Vietnam, and a life spent re-creating the past in musty library stacks had come to seem irrelevant. I wanted to get to China, to experience it first hand. So when I was offered a job as a stringer, or part-time reporter, in Taiwan for *The New York Times*, I happily accepted. I dreamed of being the first American correspondent to live in Peking after 1949.

It took me ten years to get there. There were two mandatory years learning the craft of journalism at *The Times* in New York and then a series of assignments in Asia—in Vietnam, Japan, and Hong Kong—waiting for China to open its doors to U.S. news organizations. When Jimmy Carter finally normalized U.S. relations with China in December 1978, I was ready to go to Peking, though unfortunately it meant leaving my wife, Barbara, who was pregnant, and our three-year-old son, Ethan, in Hong Kong. Peking had an acute housing shortage, and the government warned me that the only accommodation they could offer for at least the next year was a single hotel room, hardly enough space to both live in with my family and do my work.

As a police state, China poses special problems for a journalist. Many of the most significant insights I gained, or the most poignant anecdotes I heard, came from people I cannot name or portray in detail because of the reprisals they would face. Wherever possible, I have identified the people I knew, and wherever a full three-syllable Chinese name appears, like that of the sculptor Wang Keping, it is the name of the actual person. But where I felt it necessary to camouflage identities, I have either left my informants anonymous or

given them only a fictional first or last name, like Lihua, the young petitioner in Chapter 5, or Bing, in Chapter 10. In several cases, I have altered minor details of my friends' lives to protect them—placing them in a different city or giving them a new occupation. But all their comments and quotations are genuine, and none of the characters are composites.

This book is intended for general readers, and I hope that specialists will forgive a few conventions I have chosen to make it easier for the ordinary reader. Instead of the usual Chinese nomenclature for their education system—junior middle school and senior middle school—I have opted for the more familiar terms junior and senior high school. I have followed *The New York Times*'s policy of adopting the Communists' *pinyin* system for transcribing Chinese names except for a few well-known places. The capital of China thus remains Peking, rather than the *pinyin* version, Beijing. Similarly, in keeping with *The Times*'s format, I have retained the traditional spelling for places and people outside the mainland, like Hong Kong (which would become Xiang Gang in *pinyin*), and the Nationalist leaders like Chiang Kai-shek and his son, Chiang Ching-kuo. The *pinyin* system presents a few special tasks for the English-speaking reader: Q is pronounced like the ch in chicken, x like the s in she, zh like the j in Joe, and c is like the ts in hats.

I alone am responsible for the judgments in this book, but my obligations to others who helped me on my journey are manifold. I owe a primary debt to Jan Wong, my assistant in Peking, for her guidance, enthusiasm, and generous introductions to her Chinese friends. Jan appears by name on a number of pages, but her real contributions are immeasurable. I am deeply grateful to my editors at *The New York Times*, A. M. Rosenthal and Seymour Topping, who encouraged and sustained this enterprise. John Fairbank at Harvard, who introduced me to China, has been a wise counselor for many years. To him and to several other academic specialists I am indebted for their useful suggestions: Merle Goldman at Boston University, Nicholas Lardy at Yale, and Jerome Alan Cohen, formerly of the Harvard Law School and now of New York. I want to express thanks to two sage Chinese friends in Hong Kong who instructed me in the arcane art of China-watching, Vincent Lo and Sydney Liu; to my journalistic colleagues in Peking, Michael Parks, Victoria Graham, and Liu Heungshing, for their timely assistance; to friends in the diplomatic corps who shared their knowledge and time, Roger Garside of the British Embassy, and Charles Sylvester, Christopher Szymanski, and William McCahill of the U.S. mission; to the research staff of *The New York Times* for their prompt and resourceful aid, Barbara Oliver, Donna Anderson, and Judith Greenfeld; to others in Peking who contributed generously, Eileen Wu and Janet Yang; and not least to Charles Chu of Connecticut College, who graciously provided the handsome calligraphy that decorates the book.

Roger Jellinek, my main editor, has been an imaginative, patient, and

invaluable guide. I also want to express special acknowledgment to my other editor, Fredrica S. Friedman, for her constant encouragement and judicious improvements. And I have a particular debt to my wife, Barbara, for her forbearance and support, and to those Chinese who cannot be named but who made this book possible.

F.B.

Wellesley, Massachusetts

February 1, 1982

CONTENTS

Introduction: Clawed by the Tiger	3
-----------------------------------	---

*Part One: Connections

1. Foreign Devils—Hostmanship	23
2. "Where Are You, Comrade?"—Identity	39
3. The Giant Flight of Stairs— Rank But Not Class	64
4. The Back Door—Getting Along	89
5. Eating Bitterness—Lihua	113

*Part Two: Passages

6. Sex Without Joy—Love and Marriage	129
7. Holding Up Half the Sky—Women	162
8. No Road Out—Youth	179
9. Growing Up <i>Guai</i> — The Chinese Passages	203
10. Report in the Evening—Bing	221

*Part Three: Systems

11. A Pig Under the Roof—Peasants	235
12. The Iron Rice Bowl—Industry	258
13. Follow the Leader—The Organization	280

14. A World Turned Upside Down—
Hong and Weidong 305

*Part Four: Persuasions

15. Soldiers in the Grass—
The Control Apparatus 319
16. *Lao Gai*—The Chinese Gulag 342
17. The American Agent—Dr. Bill Gao 370

*Part Five: Messages

18. Little Road News—Information 383
19. To Rebel Is Justified—Dissent 406
20. Serving the Workers and Peasants—
Wang Keping 435

Epilogue: China, the West,
and the Future 446

Illustrations follow page 244.

CHINA

ALIVE
IN
THE
BITTER
SEA

Clawed by the Tiger

虎口逃生

INTRODUCTION

It was a cold, overcast day in January 1980 when I arrived at the cavernous Shanghai railroad station for the overnight express train to Peking. A blue-uniformed woman conductor with short pigtailed poking out from under her round cap was waiting beside the door to my car. In what had seemed a routine transaction, I had purchased my ticket the day before in an office of the China Travel Service, the state-run tourist agency. At least the middle-aged clerk at the counter had not evinced any particular interest in me—I just presented my green travel pass from the Public Security Bureau, China's police, and paid for my passage. That struck me as a good omen. I had chosen to make the trip by train, a twenty-hour ride, rather than by plane, a mere two hours' flight, in hopes of encountering some Chinese who might be willing to ignore the official regulations against talking to a foreigner away from the prying eyes of neighbors or office mates. It was a tactic other Westerners in China had sometimes used with success.

But when I approached the green and yellow train, the conductor's broad face broke into an immense smile. "Welcome to our train," she said almost too eagerly. "You are the American reporter, are you not?"

It was more a statement of fact than a question. As I stood with my suitcase in my hand, I might as well have been naked. My hopes continued to fade as the conductor, a stocky woman in her late twenties, whose bulk was magnified by the layers of sweaters and padded underwear she had stuffed under her uniform, began walking down the car corridor. Through a crack in my compartment door, I could hear her stopping to announce to the other passengers in her booming voice:

"We have a foreigner on board. He is an American journalist. He speaks Chinese. He speaks very good Chinese." That was the alert, I calculated.

Then she returned to minister to me. "Please let me know if there is

anything I can do to serve you. My name is Ding." An appropriate appellation, for in Chinese *ding* means solid, like nails, and she struck me as a rare cross between a Marine drill sergeant and a cheerful, overweight waitress.

Mustering the remains of my courage, I asked Ding how she was so well informed about me. "The responsible comrades notify us who the passengers are, so we can make preparations," she replied.

Ding's preparations included making sure that I had the four-berth compartment all to myself, a comfortable but to me disappointing way to travel. Still, I thought, I might meet someone in the dining car. What time was lunch? I asked Ding.

"I will call you after the other passengers are finished," she answered. "It will be more convenient for you, it won't be so crowded."

Indeed, when she finally did summon me, there were only two Chinese left in the dining car, and they were finishing their soup, the last course in a Chinese meal. When they saw me, they hastily gulped down the final sips and departed. I felt like the plague. As the train crossed the rice fields of the Yangtze River Valley, dry and brown in the weak winter afternoon, the long trip appeared a mistake.

Several hours later when we stopped in Nanjing, the old capital of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists, I got out to stretch my legs. Ding was already on the platform, a bucket and mop in her hands, to wash down the outside of our car. She was the model of discipline. Another passenger, a dignified man with only a thin patch of white hair left on his head, who appeared to be in his seventies, was also taking some exercise. In the most innocent gambit I could think of, I asked if he was going to Peking.

The answer came back in flawless English. "Yes, are you?" Again I was caught off guard. "Where did you learn such good English?" I continued, growing bolder.

"At Harvard. I went to Harvard Medical School and lived in Cambridge, before Liberation in 1949," the stranger explained. By chance, I went to Harvard also, and Cambridge is my hometown. When the time came to reboard the train, the doctor volunteered to sit with me.

"You are the first American I have talked to since 1949," he said. He had tucked his hands up inside the long sleeves of his padded brown jacket with a high mandarin collar against the cold, an old Chinese gesture. "Until recently I wouldn't have dared to be seen with you, but I think it may be all right now," he said. Then, as afternoon turned into evening, he recounted the story of his past thirty years.

Like many of his friends studying abroad, he had returned to China in 1949 because he felt himself a patriot and wanted to take part in rebuilding China. "I was not a Communist," the doctor said, "but I admired what they were trying to do. Old China was so backward, so poor, and so corrupt, there

were beggars who starved to death in the streets every day.” The early 1950s were a time of optimism—under Communist guidance, new factories were built, land in the countryside was collectivized, and China proved its strength by fighting the United States to a standstill in Korea.

But the doctor’s life changed in 1957 with the Hundred Flowers campaign, the time when Mao Zedong encouraged greater freedom of expression and invited intellectuals like him to criticize the Party’s shortcomings in the belief that the overwhelming majority of Chinese now accepted Communist rule.

“I took Mao at his word, I thought he was sincere,” the physician recalled. When the Shanghai city government asked him to a large meeting to express his views, he recommended that the Communists ought to remove the largely uneducated former peasants turned guerrilla warriors whom they had installed as Party secretaries to run the country’s hospitals. Instead, he urged, hospitals should be left to the charge of professional doctors. But a few weeks later Mao reversed his policy and instituted the Anti-Rightist campaign.

“They did what they call ‘putting a cap’ on me, I was labeled a rightist.” The doctor was taken to a struggle session, a mass meeting where the victim is shouted at, insulted, and often beaten by dozens of people until he finally confesses his supposed crimes. “They called it a ‘self-help meeting,’ to help me improve my attitude,” he continued in a simple matter-of-fact tone devoid of self-pity. After a month of this treatment, he was arrested, imprisoned, and eventually sent to a labor reform camp in the mountains several days’ bus ride from Shanghai, where he worked breaking rocks in a quarry.

He got out of the labor camp just in time to be assailed again in the Cultural Revolution. Mao launched this adventure in 1966 both to oust his adversaries in the Party hierarchy and to prevent the country from slipping back into what the Great Helmsman feared were the soft, corrupt ways of pre-1949 China. The doctor was arrested once more—his old label of rightist made him a handy target for eager radicals in his hospital. They incarcerated him in a basement room in the hospital where autopsies were performed and beat him with wooden boards every day for several months. This time his label was also extended to his family. His wife, a doctor herself, was prohibited from practicing medicine and made to sweep the floors and clean the toilets in her clinic. His son, a brilliant medical school student who had passed the college entrance exams with nearly the highest marks in China, was shipped off to labor as a peasant in a village in the far northeast. His teen-age daughter was expelled from her junior high school, since she was the offspring of a reactionary, and assigned to work in an automobile garage.

After Mao’s death and the overthrow of the radical Gang of Four, including Mao’s termagant widow, Jiang Qing, in 1976, the doctor had been restored to a position of authority in his hospital. But he was still surrounded

by his former tormentors, with whom he had to work daily. "It's funny, some of them now fall asleep at political study sessions from boredom," he said of his accusers. "For all of us, the revolution is over. What is left is cynicism. It is very sad for China."

This episode on the train was typical of my experience in China. There seemed to be two Chinas: one the official version, with a cast of people like the conductor, cardboard cutouts from the *People's Daily*, the Communist Party newspaper, always smiling, selfless, and dedicated to the cause. The other China was partially hidden, an inner universe whose one billion inhabitants had gone through three decades of cataclysmic change, sometimes for the better, but often, like the doctor's trauma, involving brutality, waste, and terrible personal suffering. The tragic concatenation of one political campaign after another—land reform in the early 1950s, the Hundred Flowers Campaign, the Great Leap Forward in 1958 with its resulting food shortages, the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s, and the continued factional battles in the 1970s—had left a legacy of popular apathy and disillusionment. Gone were the idealism, the drive, the almost religious fervor which marked the Communists' early years.

The official China was the one I had read about in the often breathless accounts of Western visitors who had spent a few weeks in China. Traveling on the invisible dotted line of a few dozen cities and communes that is the authorized itinerary for almost all foreigners in China, they had returned to assure the world that China had really ended crime, inflation, and unemployment. China was the country where a tourist who left a used razor blade or an expended ball-point pen in his wastebasket would have it miraculously returned to him at the next city he visited. China was also the remarkable land where millions of urban high school graduates, following Chairman Mao Zedong's call, happily went off to work for the rest of their lives as peasants in the villages, like Boy Scouts, some Americans said. I remembered Jerry Rubin stopping in my office in Hong Kong, where I reported on China for four years for *The New York Times* before American news organizations were permitted to open bureaus in Peking in 1979, after the normalization of Sino-American relations. The former Yippie leader had just spent several weeks touring China and he enthused over what he said was "the spirit of real love the people all have for each other. You can see it in their eyes." They weren't concerned for themselves or money, like materialistic Americans. I asked him if he had any doubts about what he had seen. Yes, he admitted, he had wondered, briefly. "One day as I was riding on a bus, I said to myself, either everyone is telling the truth or everyone is pulling my leg. It came to me that everyone must be telling the truth."

Americans would not suspend their critical judgment like this in analyzing the Soviet Union—we had learned what Stalin was like; we had read Solzhe-

nitsyn. But we gave China the benefit of the doubt. It seemed to me that China cast a kind of magic spell over Americans and other Westerners. There was nothing new in this. It had been going on since the French Philosophes of the eighteenth century, who imagined that the ancient sage Confucius had created a perfectly harmonious government which China was still following. In the late nineteenth century, when a current of missionary zeal swept churches and college campuses in the United States, Americans dreamed of converting China to Christianity and "saving" China in a single generation. At the turn of the century, as Americans became terrified by the specter of what was then called overproduction, a new image arose—that of the fabulous China market, the 400 million customers who would buy up the excess of American manufacturers. During World War Two, when we were fighting Japan, we looked to Chiang Kai-shek as a valiant democrat leading China into the free world. All these images were more the projection of our own myths than a hard look at reality. Indeed, they contained a measure of cultural condescension, an unwillingness to look at things from the Chinese perspective.

But the longer I lived in Peking, the more the other dimension came into view—the hardships, the absurdities, the stratagems of daily life. Gradually over the twenty months I lived there, I formed genuine friendships with a number of Chinese and they initiated me into this human quotient, the myriad ways Chinese had invented to ignore, evade, resist, or confound the revolution that Mao had thrust on them. In short, to survive.

In the process, I had to unlearn many of what I took to be facts about China. The 38 million members of the Communist Party, I had presumed, must be stalwart adherents of the revolution. So I was not prepared for an energetic, candid, middle-aged Party member who was chairman of her local street committee, the lowest level of government organization. One evening when I stopped by her fifth-floor walk-up apartment, I found she was reading the Bible. I was incredulous. By its own regulations, the Communist Party is devoted to atheism, at least when it was not worshipping Mao. When I asked if she was not afraid of getting in trouble, she laughed and awkwardly practiced crossing herself. She explained that recently a forty-five-year-old man had knocked on her door, claiming to be a friend of a woman she knew. He wondered if she believed in God or had read the Bible. It was a very dangerous act, but she was impressed with his sincerity and intrigued by what he had to say. He had spent ten years in prison because of his Christian belief and was unable to get a job.

"If there is a god, why has he let you be treated so cruelly?" she asked.

"You don't understand," he replied. Actually, he claimed, he had been very lucky. "God gave me a wonderful wife. When I was in prison, the police demanded that she divorce me to show she did not share my ideas, but she

refused. Now I can't get a job, but though she is only a factory worker, she supports both of us."

In the end, my friend accepted his offering of a Chinese-language Bible that had been printed in Hong Kong and smuggled into the mainland. She was reading it with evident interest. "You don't know it," she advised me. "But Christianity is spreading rapidly in China because people are so disillusioned with communism." If she had been a political dissident, I would have been doubtful. But she was the neighborhood Party boss.

With Mao's commitment to revolution, I had assumed China would offer great social mobility, the chance for people to get ahead. But in many ways, I discovered, China was more conservative and hierarchical than the United States, Japan, or Western Europe. Only 3 percent of China's young people can go to college, one of the major routes to success. By comparison, 35 percent of Americans go to university. Chinese can't pick their own job, they must wait till they are assigned work by the state, and once given a job, it is very difficult to arrange a transfer. China's peasants probably have less chance to escape their bondage to toil than their ancestors did before 1949 because of the restrictions the Communists have erected against people leaving the countryside.

A hustling, fast-talking youthful official in a foreign trade corporation who had recently returned from his first trip to the United States said the most impressive thing in America to him was its sense of opportunity.

"Even an elevator operator can start his own business and become a millionaire if he works hard and saves his money," the official commented over lunch in the Peking Hotel where I lived and worked for the first year I was in China.

In a joking riposte, I suggested the opposite might happen in China—the ex-millionaire capitalist would be turned into an elevator operator. For a moment my companion stared at me in silence and I was afraid he had construed my remark as a slur on China.

"No," he finally said. "In China they wouldn't let a millionaire be an elevator operator. That is a job for someone who works for the Public Security Ministry, to keep track of who goes in and out of buildings. The millionaire would be forced to clean toilets."

Mao demanded a strong belief in equality. So I was surprised to find that the Party itself is divided into twenty-four grades, and that in a supposedly classless society the children and grandchildren of people who were branded as landlords in 1949 are still stuck with the stigma, barring them from joining the Party or the army, or sharing in benefits like cooperative health insurance in the countryside. I was also startled to discover that some of my new Chinese friends had servants, affectionately and euphemistically dubbed

"aunties." I hadn't realized that Party officials have their own exclusive network of markets, bookshops, hospitals, and resorts which provides them with food and services unavailable to the "masses." Many of these privileges are carefully sheltered behind official secrecy to preserve the appearance of equality. Only at the end of my tour in China was I able to find out where Hua Guofeng, then still Chairman of the Communist Party, lived. A friend whose father was a general in the People's Liberation Army volunteered to drive with me there. Hua's residence turned out to be a large, forbidding compound in the northwest section of the city, measuring four hundred yards long by three hundred yards wide, set behind twenty-five-foot-high gray concrete walls that were topped with slits for guns. Chinese called it simply "Building Number Eight," since they said it had cost eight million yuan, or \$5.3 million, to construct, an extraordinary sum of money for China.*

Chinese industry has grown at the impressive pace of almost 10 percent a year since 1950, I knew from reading Peking's statistical claims, so I was constantly struck by reports of bungling and incompetence by the country's economic managers. In 1981, the New China News Agency disclosed, the Ministry of Petroleum had wasted several billion dollars on building a cross-country pipeline for natural gas from Sichuan province to the industrialized region of China along the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River. Senior officials of the ministry had deliberately inflated Sichuan's gas reserves, ignoring protests from lower-level technicians, in order to get the appropriations to build the pipeline. Then when the promised gas failed to materialize, the project had to be scrapped.

That Peking maintained its control through a large police ministry, supported by a sophisticated system of agencies like the street committees, was no secret. But it took a personal encounter to learn just how pervasive the police could be. One evening when I went out for a walk from the Peking Hotel, I noticed a tiny figure of a woman in the shadows. It was a bitterly cold February night, and she was bundled in a black overcoat, with a yellow scarf over her head and a cotton surgical mask covering her face, the kind many Chinese wear to help keep out Peking's cold and dust. As I walked, I sensed she was keeping pace with me and, after fifty feet, was approaching me.

"Where are you going?" she asked. It was an unexpectedly bold opening for a Chinese.

"For a walk," I replied.

*At the official exchange rate set by Peking in 1981 \$1 is worth 1.50 yuan. But most diplomats and foreign businessmen calculate that the real value of the Chinese currency is only about half that. Peking has conceded as much by allowing Chinese factories which export their goods to sell them at a lower exchange rate; otherwise they would be priced too high for the world market. In the interest of simplicity, I have stuck with the official rate.