



## Depth of fear

*Ken Coates*

*In June 1985, the Chinese government convened a forum “for safeguarding world peace”. Ken Coates attended at the invitation of the Chinese. In this extract from China and the Bomb (1986), he recounts some of his experiences.*

While I was in China attending the Beijing Peace Forum, I asked my hosts about these deep shelters which have recently been partially converted to civilian use. At the end of the Forum, they invited me to visit one. So traumatic was this experience that I wish it had been shared with all the other participants in the Forum, who at the time had set off on a tour of other areas in the country. My guide was Mr Chang, a clever young graduate who works for the Chinese Association for International Understanding. Mr Chang was deeply interested in relations with Europe, and interrogated me ceaselessly not only about the European peace movement, but also about the prospects for economic co-operation. He clearly saw the Chinese opening to Europe as an important part of the campaign to modernize the country, but he was also concerned to benefit from the cultural exchanges that became possible. Deep in discussion, we drove through the main Tiananmen Square and arrived at a crowded shopping centre a couple of hundred yards or so further on. Beijing’s main shopping centres are not like those in England. Somehow there are always more people, closer together. The streets, all pedestrian, precincts now, were absolutely crowded. We turned into Qianmen Avenue.

It cut through the middle of its area, and was about 300 yards long. On the corner was a draper’s store, quite large. A little further on was a massive drugstore, dispensing herbal remedies under the guidance of a panel of qualified doctors. Along the way we passed an ornate cast iron shop front, imposing a touch of Victoriana on this strictly working

environment. This, apparently, was the seat of the former imperial court tailors, now given over to more democratic customers. All the puzzles of modern China range themselves along this street. Opposite the shop dispensing acupuncture tools and guides was another retailing Japanese computers.

We went into the drapery where our exploration had begun. Ms Ma Jinli, the manageress, greeted us. Hardly were we introduced before she motioned us to stand back and pushed a button under the counter by the main entrance. Instantly, as if in a James Bond film, the whole floor behind the counter wound back under the wall, revealing a deep staircase. Not even the most practised eye would have detected that such an entrance might exist. Ms Ma led us down the stone steps. We entered an underground tunnel, which ran down some yards before we came to an archway. Carved around it was the rubric "Keep in mind that China is being threatened" and the date 1975, which, I was told, was the date of completion of this part of the network. On the wall opposite the archway was a large inscription by Mao Tse-tung: "To serve the people against war and against disaster".

Beneath the arch we went, in to a veritable warren of underground lanes and streets. The complex began in 1969, I was informed. It was dug out by manual labour, using picks and shovels. We entered an underground street which has the name Da Sha Lan. The complex around this took ten years to complete. It is constructed at two levels. At the point we entered, an intricate pattern of lanes and chambers lies eight metres below the surface, and is protected by elaborate insulation from whatever may pass above. At a deeper level (15 metres further down) lies a parallel web, just as intricate. These two complexes involve 3000 metres of tunnelling, and a number of installations. Now these have been converted to civilian purposes. They are extensive. There are 45 above ground shops over these tunnels, with 2000 staff members, and all 2000 were involved in the work of underground conversion under the guidance of professional designers.

I went straight away to one of the subterranean shops, selling a variety of fancy goods. The Da Shan Lan underground shop is obviously a tourist attraction, full of lacquer work, jade ornaments and pretty silks. A row of chairs down the middle accompanies a fairly rudimentary Coca Cola Bar, busily patronised. Several shoppers were browsing among the bangles and necklaces. Moving further in to the warren from this shop there was a kind of command post. A curtain at the end of the room framed a plastic map board which was illuminated from behind to provide a map of both upper and lower tunnel levels. Ms Ma took a pointer, and described it all very

precisely. Near the shop was an underground hotel, which we later visited. Above the hotel stood the pharmacy at street level, so that in time of war all the vital drugs could speedily be lowered down, to function as part of the underground hospital which the hotel would then become. Below, the lanes of apartments at the deep level were currently used as storehouses. The entire network is studded by entrances, in all, more than 90. Every important shop above ground has one or two access points so that, said Ma Jinli, within six minutes everyone in the district could be safely underground.

But, if they dropped a megaton on Beijing, I asked Mr Chang, would you not all be cooked? "I hope not", he replied. Assuming they were not, there were a number of long exit tunnels, leading towards the suburban outskirts of the city. One ran past the famous Peking Duck Restaurant. It took, said Ms Ma, three hours to walk the length of one of these tunnels. Our eyes returned to the plastic map. It blinked intelligence about the different services which were available: water pumping stations, air pumps, telecoms, generator room. "But", said I, "what about electromagnetic pulse? Nuclear explosions do unfamiliar things to electronic communications. They fuse circuits and render equipment inoperable." My hosts were not sure about EMP, but they were sure that the tunnel complex had made a big contribution to solving the problem of civilian space. Overcrowding above ground meant that it was a God-send to be able to call up so much unused warehousing, not to say so many community amenities.

"How many people would use this shelter?" I asked. "It can house 10,000 people", I was told. "But there are ten million citizens of Beijing", I said. "They are all catered for" said Ms Ma. The shock of this statement, mercifully, hit me rather slowly. But there it was. These other underground complexes, too, had now been opened to solve peacetime problems. Roller skating rinks, restaurants, wholesale stores, a 24,000 square metre fruit depository, rifle ranges, theatres, clinics, libraries, a gymnasium, all fan out beneath the surface of Beijing's streets. What did this extraordinary labyrinth entail in social investment over the ten years it took to build? How much of China's social surplus went into delving underneath her cities?

Quite clearly, Beijing is not alone. Recently, the Chinese press reported the civilian conversion of shelters in Shanghai, Tianjin, Guangzhou, and Chongqing. If all were as extensive as the Beijing complex, then the Chinese digs since 1969 represent a labour not greatly inferior to that involved in building the Great Wall. Such a labour also represents a great

fear, since it is quite apparent that no one, not even a madman, would contemplate such a vast diversion of resources unless there were reason to think it necessary.

I continued my underground exploration. On the way to the hotel, Ms Ma threw another switch which dropped the floor of the tunnel into a neat self-lowering staircase and led us down to the deep level. Here, the ventilation blew a distinct chill, and we felt our skins tingle with the cold. We passed large stacks of merchandise, and peered through the windows of underground chambers into further locked storehouses. In every direction the tunnels ran, and it would have been easy to have lost one's way. Ducking and weaving, we wound our way round a wide circle until we emerged again outside the underground hotel. This, because at the time of its excavation it had been scheduled as a wartime hospital, consisted of a number of rooms, equipped with several bunk beds each. "It is open to a variety of clients", said Ms Ma. "But priority is given to the relatives of those who work on the staffs of the shops and enterprises above ground." The hotel staff were busy sweeping and polishing as we left, to emerge once again above ground in the draper's shop.

I am not normally a souvenir collector, but I thought that it would be useful to buy something from this shop, as a keepsake. I decided to ask for a shirt. Amid great commotion, watched by a few dozen people, I tried on a variety of shirts until I found one that fitted. It was clear that people were surprised that this foreigner should want to buy such a shirt, and more than a little amused. The shirt cost me 10 yuan, or a bit more than £3, at the official exchange rate. "How long would I have to work to earn this?", I asked Mr Chang. "I get 60 yuan a month in my job, so it would take me nearly a week."

Travelling in China among all those people, your mind takes a fancy that it can understand what a billion is. It also takes a fancy that it can begin to appreciate the enormous audacity, even sacrilege, of the Chinese plan to modernize by the year 2000. This involves an aim to achieve an annual per capita income of 1000 dollars, which would be a sea-change indeed. But, in this exploration of the Chinese underground, I realized for the first time the depth of the fear which had been aroused by all those nuclear threats, all that blackmail, all that intimidation. It is a fear which can be measured in cubic yards of earth removed, in feet per second of air pumped through vast tunnelled emplacements, in social productivity foregone. The removal of such fear would not only render the world the safer. It would, in China, be a major economic resource in its own right.