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This story is prompted by reading Polly's book of her travels in China in recent years. It fascinated me at how much it has changed since my time there. There were no private cars whatsoever just beaten up old red taxis and sinister looking black government cars. Everyone either walked or rode a bike or bus. Mao's little red book was the still being carried by everyone.

I travelled regularly up to China in the 1970s and into the mid 1980s so saw that country when Mao's presence was still very dominant. Every one without exception wore blue or grey Mao suits. Lighting was minimal and an air of gloom pervaded the scene. The cities at night were eerie in the extreme. I had an interesting incident one night in Beijing.

I was travelling in those days to take secret aid to the churches who were very underground then as if the local Christians were caught running a house church the penalties didn't bear thinking about. Anything from execution to being made to stand up to the neck in a pit of sewerage etc. Real nasty stuff. One night I was staying in the big Beijing Hotel in Tianenman Square. Somehow I accidentally got into a lift that was meant for staff only I suspect and instead of going to the ground floor found myself in the basement of that place. When the door opened I stepped out into long concrete corridor that was dimly lit and seemed to stretch for miles. No one was around and it was deathly quiet. I saw a door open maybe 30 yards away down this corridor with light coming out of it. It was probably a dumb thing to do but I decided to creep quietly down and have a peek into it to see what went on there. Fortunately I was super careful in just how I took that look as when I peered around the door jamb with just one eye the sight that greeted me was chilling. This room was vast and had dozens of people all sitting at long benches looking into screens. Not one of them was talking or even moving their concentration was so intense. They all had their backs to me so I was able to see that the screens nearest the door were of every room in the hotel. It was security police people I guess watching everything that was going on in that place. They watched everything the guests were doing in their rooms and also all around the hotel. It was downright spooky to be honest and showed the level of surveillance that goes on in that country. It does not take much imagination to think what they do today with the super spy cameras now available. The gear at that time was probably primitive by comparison to today. I do not not doubt that travellers today are probably still being watched wherever they go in that incredible country but perhaps not with the same paranoia. They like our money too much now.

