

people. "If free elections were held tomorrow," gushes *Time*, "the 74-year-old Kádár would win by virtual acclamation." Of course, nasty little things like his executions and imprisonments are mentioned, but this sour note lies buried in the text, hidden to all but the most attentive reader—much as the bodies of General Secretary Kádár's victims lie hidden in Section 301.

Far more telling than the appeal of "goulash Communism" are its ancillary, aesthetic considerations. Say what you will, socialism puts a brake on the capitalist dynamo of change that makes so many uncomfortable. Whereas even Paris's Champs Elysées now boasts a monstrous glittering Burger King, Hungary retains the (faded) dignity of the late nineteenth century. True, it does have its own fast food chain, City Burger, whose dubious offerings are apparently enough to

appease the public taste for such things. But they are few and low-key. No golden arches here.

Even religion has been made palatable, once the government decided a little opium might be just the thing for a discontented populace. During my brief stay a black flag was hung from Matthias Church to signify the death of the cardinal-primate who succeeded Mindszenty, Laszlo Lekai. In sharp contrast to the defiance of Mindszenty and the crafty maneuverings of the Polish Church, the Hungarian Church under Cardinal Lekai was compromised and stripped of its animating spirit. So today there is no need for distasteful persecution of the hierarchy, because it has been given the perfect status for intellectuals: ceremony without substance, like the pomp surrounding Sarah Ferguson's wedding to Prince Andrew.

Finally there is the appeal of the people themselves. In a totalitarian society even the innocent cannot avoid acquiring a revolutionary consciousness. Ordinary observations about day-to-day life are fraught with political significance. No wonder academics find it so enchanting; it makes the entire country into a campus. Even the attitude of the rulers toward their charges smacks of the paternalism of the university motto, *in loco parentis*.

So placid is present-day Hungary that the gradual-reform-through-trade theory is undeniably tempting. Far from the recalcitrant oppressed who in 1956 tore down the gigantic statue of Joseph Stalin on Heroes Square and dragged it through the streets of Pest, today's Hungarians are freer and more prosperous than most of their Eastern-

bloc neighbors. In the Budapest Hilton, there is even a casino (foreign currency only, of course), blackjack tables set up in the stone tower of the old Dominican abbey. Although the brochures depict sultry Hungarian maidens, most of those in attendance the Saturday evening I entered appeared to be middle-aged German men, losing quite a lot of money. For my part, I managed to walk away with 175 Deutsche marks on a token bet.

Definitely not the Gulag image. Yet for all the talk about the withering away of Marxist rule, East European Party leaders have proved themselves remarkably resilient. Largely this is because people everywhere, including Marxists, return to the old certainties in times of crisis. In 1956 this meant Russian troops. Today on the anniversary of that revolution, the old certainties still remain—all 70,000 of them. □

THE TALKIES



A GREAT WALL

by Bruce Bawer

As its title suggests, *A Great Wall* is a study in barriers—specifically, the cultural barriers between two branches of a family. One branch consists of a highly successful San Francisco computer exec, Leo Fang (played by the film's director and co-writer, Peter Wang), his wife Grace (Sharon Iwai), and their college-age son Paul (Kelvin Han Yee); the other consists of Leo's sister (Shen Guanglan) in Peking, her husband Chao (Hu Xiaoguang), a retired government official, and their teenage daughter Lili (Li Qinqin). The episodic story concerns a summer vacation during which the Fangs visit the Chaos in Peking (where most of the film was actually shot, with real Red Chinese actors playing the natives). During their time together, the two families observe, bewilder, amuse, and learn from each other, and eventually part to resume their separate (but somewhat altered) lives in their different worlds.

In a way, the film's title is misleading; for to compare the cultural barriers between the Fangs and Chaos to the

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Great Wall of China is, I think, to prepare the viewer for a somewhat more pessimistic film than Wang (along with co-screenwriter Shirley Sun) has created. This is, indeed, a film not of prodigious divisions or colossal confrontations between cultures but of fine distinctions between two families' attitudes, customs, and standards of living. To be sure, there is the occasional mild animadversion. When Leo tells his sister, for example, that he has quit his position after a disagreement with his boss (he believes he was refused a promotion because he's a "China-man"), the sister insists he has acted unwisely: "Never disagree with your leader." Paul's high-fashion American togs likewise provoke reproach from his Chinese kin: the boy's Calvin Klein trousers look to Chao like "work pants," his expensive jacket like a piece of "burlap sacking with patches."

Politics are never explicitly mentioned. That the Chao family is living under Communism is not so much of an issue here as one might expect, and in fact we are reminded of this circumstance only occasionally, and with Oriental indirectness. For example, when Lili bicycles past the Great Hall of the People, we briefly see the por-

traits of Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao; when Leo and his sister visit their father's shabby grave, Mrs. Chao refers obliquely to the Cultural Revolution: "Father passed away the year the chaos began. We couldn't give him a proper burial." And when a handsome boy named Liu (charismatically played by one Wang Xio) falls for Lili, he attempts (in one of the film's more charming sequences) to woo her by reciting the Gettysburg Address in a fractured but exuberant English.

The latter sort of sequence—a simple, realistic vignette that is plainly and lovingly observed—is the sort at which Wang excels. The film's strength, accordingly, resides largely in its convincing glimpses of the Chinese way of life. Wang takes us into a variety of settings: Lili's English class; a public bathhouse and a school for fashion models, both of which Liu visits in search of work; a gym where children, ranged in military rows, practice their ping-pong serves; a community center where old folks and youngsters alike sit glued to a TV screen, watching an opera performance; a small auditorium where a woman warbles a traditional Chinese

melody about the Han Dynasty. Interesting touches abound. There is a view of the Chinese class system in operation—the principal obstacle to the romance between Lili (daughter of a retired Party man) and Liu (who lives in a "junkyard" with his scholar father) seems to be that they are from different social levels. And Wang devotes plenty of attention to the Chinese young people's preoccupation with things Western, especially American: They sing American popular songs and Italian arias; they drink Coke, though the taste makes them grimace; and they attend nightclubs where the dance music consists of extremely lame disco versions of "Oh Susannah" and "The Merry Widow Waltz." Some of the young Chinese even behave like Americans. When, near the beginning of the movie, Liu and his friend Yu greet Lili and her friend Jan in the street, Lili is surprised at Jan's encouragement of their fresh advances. "Why are you saying hi to strangers?" she berates Jan. "You're no American."

Despite this rebuke, however, it is Lili, more than anyone else, whose head is turned by her American relatives. Under the influence of her cousin Paul, she chides her mother for open-

ing her mail, arguing that it's an invasion of her "privacy." (Lili uses the English word because, according to the film, there is no Chinese equivalent.) So fascinated is Lili by Paul that she begins to neglect not only her new admirer, Liu, but her studies ("Since your brother came," Mr. Chao complains to his wife, "I haven't seen Lili open a book") and instead dances around the house in American T-shirts, listening to tapes of rock music. She is supposed to be preparing for the all-important college entrance exam—as in Japan, only the very highest scorers will enter college—but Paul's genial indifference to such matters has infected her.

It should be mentioned here that, in a manifest attempt to contrast studious Chinese and frivolous American youth, Wang gives us, in Paul, an almost unbelievably pinheaded California rich kid—a stereotype of the party-all-the-time West Coast mentality. Paul is aggressively American; in the San Francisco sequence near the beginning of the film, he refuses to attend his Chinese I class and, when Leo scolds him for thus "deny[ing] his cultural background" (as well as for having a Caucasian girl friend), Paul counters that "all Chinese [i.e., Chinese-American] parents are racists. . . . Why do we have to do everything the Chinese way? It doesn't get you anywhere." On arriving in Peking, this spoiled boy is amazed to discover that his aunt's house has squat toilets and no shower bath, and he spends most of the remainder of his on-screen time doing typically American things that astonish his Chinese relatives (e.g., he affectionately smacks his father in the head) and reacting with naive amusement to Chinese mores. Sometimes, to be sure, his reactions are entertaining, but more often than not they make him seem more vacuous than is humanly possible. One cannot help but think that the film would have been more interesting and believable—and the contrast between him and his Chinese counterparts just as effective—had Wang given us a Paul who was intelligent and ambitious but who had made a career choice (to be a jazz musician, say) that for a student in Peking would be all but unthinkable.

Unsurprisingly, it is Paul who is at the center of the film's most dubious subplot. When Lili tells him that she plays table tennis, he boasts, "Hey, that's my sport," and our expectation is that she is going to beat the pants off him. But in fact Paul does very well, not only against her but against the best players the city has to offer—so well, in fact, that by the end of the summer (and the film) he makes it to the finals of the Beijing International

Youth Ping Pong Tournament, where, before a large, anxious crowd, he vies for the championship with—who else?—Liu, his rival for Lili's attentions. This *Karate Kid*-type sequence is not only logically inexplicable (what is Paul Fang, who came to China with his folks for vacation, suddenly doing in an international sports competition?) but tonally inconsistent with the rest of the movie; it's precisely the sort of

thing that gifted directors stick into their films in order to appease fatuous studio executives.

A Great Wall is, then, uneven. Aside from the ping pong tournament, there is a medical emergency sequence that seems gratuitous. And certain characters—Grace Fang, for example—never do develop as fully as one might like. Yet on the whole this is an admirable piece of work—modest, sensitive, and

perceptive. Rather than indulge (as one might have expected, given the current state of the celluloid marketplace) in facile, grandiose, and politically modish statements about the Walls Between Societies, Wang has quite remarkably created a film about *people*, a film lovingly attentive to its characters' every gesture, mood, peccadillo, and habit—a film, in short, vibrant with humanity. □

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EUROPEAN DOCUMENT



TO SPY FOR POLAND

by Thomas Swick

High among the annoyances of living as a foreigner in Poland is the process of getting the permission to do so. When your visa expires and you wish to renew it (because you have found the charm of the country exceeds, or in fact

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sometimes is, the bother) you must report to an imposing bureau of unsmiling functionaries who hold in their flabby, print-stained hands your fate.

When I first went to Poland in the late 1970s, the visa office was located on the first floor of a solemn building on Warsaw's well-named Raven Street. Visits there always made me queasy.

The waiting area, dimly lit and windowless, was surrounded by numbered offices out of which tie-less clerks would regularly emerge, lock the doors behind them, and then bustle down the corridor carrying forms or decks of shuffled passports. The few chairs were usually all taken by Arab men stymied by questionnaires (the model ones in English and French were most of the time in use) and assisted by gum-cracking blondes. On the wall hung not picturesque travel posters nor even more understandable socialist slogans, but blanched advertisements for "Western" goods sold in Warsaw's dollar shops. Cinzano and Sony.

To get admitted to an office you had to barge in while it was occupied (to show your face) and then return with a platoon when it was vacated. The wait could take hours; the interview fruitless minutes. ("You don't have the 2-S form. You have to get it from the Ministry of Education. We don't do anything for you until you show us that.") I began looking on these sessions as part of a vast screening process to keep out those who were not fully dedicated to living in Poland. This idea seemed all the more real to me when, on my third request for a visa—after living and working for six months in the country—I received an offer to become a spy.

My visa was to expire the first week of February, during the semester break at the school where I was teaching. Despite the incipient close of Gierek's period of prosperity (1979 had just begun and the what seemed to me already poor food supplies were getting poorer) and the relentlessness of Poland's worst winter in a century, I wished to stay. I was enjoying my work—teaching English to high-spirited Polish teenagers—and had a contract until the summer when, it had then been made known, Karol Wojtyla would make his first trip back to his homeland since becoming Pope. Also, my fiancée, Hania, was still attending Warsaw University.

Hania accompanied me each time to Raven Street—we began our visits at the end of January—to work on my behalf as interpreter. After six months my Polish was still execrable—another reason for my desire to stay. On our first two visits we had no marked success other than, I like to hope, shortening the career of the clerk assigned to my case. He was a pale, stocky man in his thirties, with a thick moustache and a prematurely grievous voice. He would retreat from his office, fumbling with a prodigious batch of keys, when his eyes would meet ours gazing expectantly back at him, and he would make off in a languid huff. Once in another part of the city we stood on a traffic island and, looking into the back seat of a taxi waiting at the light, saw our man—scrunched with his briefcase set atop his knees, his eyes turned up at us nonplussed. I remember wondering if this phenomenon of omnipresence found us in his dreams as well.

We went back a third time to Raven Street—after being refused both a visa and a reason why—because it is customary in Poland to apply repeatedly for such formalities regardless of the firmness of the first rejections. With the arbitrariness of decision-making, it becomes a sort of lottery in which the participants invest not money but time. Like food lines, such bureaucracy keeps the masses occupied. It also alters their way of thinking. I was no longer convinced that there was not a single reason why the authorities should deny me a visa: I thought that if by some slim chance they did not find me unworthy, I should be eternally grateful.

This time after the requisite wait, we were approached by our man, looking timorous, who told me to come along alone with him: Hania should wait. He preceded me up some concrete stairs to the second floor—where I had never been before—and down an empty corridor. I noticed that some of the doors we passed were padded. About halfway down the hall he opened one of them, led me inside, and departed.



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