

Beijing Diary

[Anil K Rajvanshi](#)

Email: anilrajvanshi@gmail.com

1. There is frenzied activity of putting new buildings in Beijing because of 2008 Olympic games. All over the place high-rise buildings are being erected. This sometimes snarls the traffic and there are frequent traffic jams in Beijing. Surprisingly there was little air pollution even during the cold month of November.
2. I had gone to Beijing at the invitation of Office of National Energy Leading Group (ONELG) – a group under the leadership of Prime Minister Wen Jiabo. ONELG has been charged with developing the Energy policy of China. The Vice Chairman of ONELG Mr. Xu Ding Ming gave us a 100-course dinner in an exclusive restaurant attached to his ministerial office. All major Government ministries in Beijing have these 5-star restaurants in their buildings for official dinners. Every time we finished the food our plate would be whisked away by efficient bearers and a fresh plate of finest gold-plated China would be put in its place. Very thoughtfully, some of us who were not adapt at wielding chopsticks, were provided forks and knives.
3. Chinese men are fascinated by full-face beards. This is because at best they can have only a goatee! Thus the bellboy at the downtown hotel where I was staying could not help but ask my permission to touch and admire my beard!
4. China is a gourmet's delight. Even the roadside food vendors dish out delicious fare, though one should be careful about what to eat since choices range from snakes, eels, strange-looking sea creatures etc. Language is a major problem. However since everything is displayed one can safely opt for chicken, beef or



mutton dishes by pointing them out. The place on Wangfujing Road in downtown Beijing resembles eateries on chowpatty in Mumbai. In small, neat and well-lighted small shacks one can get all sorts of delicious food at one fifth the price of that in fancy restaurants.

5. Changing money at Bank of China was worst than getting dollars in any Nationalized Bank in India in 1980s. The rest of China has changed, but Bank of China is still operating in Mao's times. So after wasting half an hour for my turn (the lady teller had gone for a cup of tea and to chat with her colleagues), I just went to an ATM in a private bank and got the money by using my Credit Card !
6. Language is the biggest barrier in China. Though Olympic games are barely 7-8 months away, hardly any Beijing taxi driver can speak or understand English. Hence the best thing is either to get the hotel staff to write down the address for you in Chinese or to ask you friend or host to speak on a cell phone to the taxi wallah for directions !
7. Getting a local SIM card for your cell phone is a must. Because of language problem the prices of the cards can vary widely. It is better to get a local person to bargain for it. Bargaining for all goods is just like in India and normally one can bring down the cost by one fourth of what is initially asked for.
8. The cycles are in abundance all over China, though in Beijing they are being rapidly



replaced by electric bikes and cars. With increase in vehicular pollution most of the cycle riders cover their noses with a surgeon's mask. The taxi drivers drive rashly and very often encroach into the cycle lanes thus inconveniencing the cyclists. Almost all the cycle rickshaws are now off the

road. One is lucky if one can see one or two old and tattered ones being pedaled around.

9. Downtown Beijing resembles any modern European or American city with large number of high-rise buildings and broad roads which are full of cars and electric buses. The older part of Beijing though is like any Indian city with scores of small shops, chockfull of goods spread all over the place, roadside cycle repair shops, even an occasional cobbler (*mochi*) and roadside eateries.
10. Because Beijing authorities want to show the city in good light to the tourists who will visit during the Olympic games large scale modernization of hutongs (old city) is taking place. This includes broadening the lanes in these hutongs without any compensation or consideration for welfare of the inhabitants with the result that quite a number of the old residents now have to live in their small and crammed houses.
11. There has been complete westernization of Beijing. Everybody wears jeans and shirts. Except for the official function of ONELG where the hostesses were in traditional Chinese dresses everybody wears western dresses. Even the official gift shop at the entrance of Great Wall of China sells tea shirts and mostly western goods. The background music in the shop was also an American pop song.
12. Almost every street in downtown Beijing has either a McDonald or Kentucky Fried Chicken or Pizza Hut. It is really surprising that with such good Chinese food these eateries still thrive. They are frequented mostly by young people and children. In Forbidden City sometime back Starbucks was the only coffee shop till somebody raised a ruckus and it was removed.



13. The China trip is not complete without a visit to the Great Wall. We went to Badling area which has a spectacular view of great Wall. Our guide kept on insisting that we take the sliding rail. However I insisted on climbing. So from

the parking place to the highest point was a straight climb of about 3500 ft. The up and down trip took me about 2.5 hours. The scenery was fabulous and the climb was good for the circulation. Climbing the Wall reminded me of pilgrimage to Badrinath. So I prayed at the top that China and India should be partners for the future of the world.

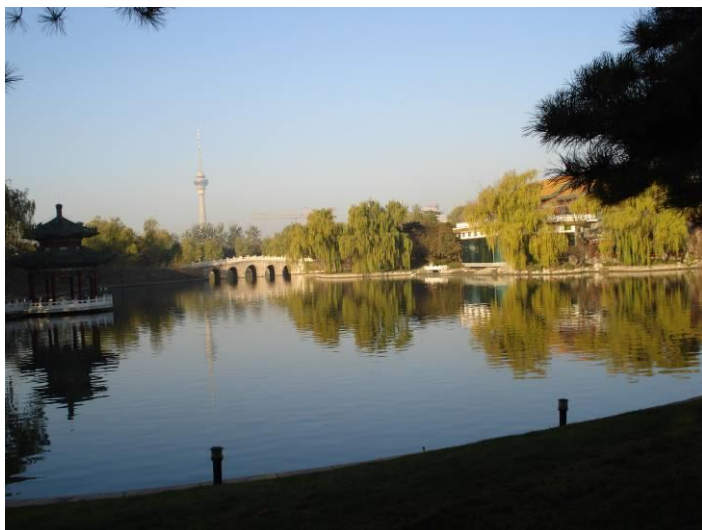
14. There were hardly any fat people to be seen on Beijing roads. The only fat people I saw in the Great Wall of China were American and European tourists. A marching band from North Ohio State University U.S.A. was being filmed at the first landing of the Great Wall of China. Almost all these band members were overweight and hence they could not climb the wall and thus were being filmed at the first landing.
15. The general cleanliness at almost all the places is amazing. Though Chinese spit all over the place just like Indians I saw whole battery of blue clothed cleaning persons pick up papers, garbage and clean the spits from the roads at all places almost round the clock. The bathrooms in public places like Temple of Heaven would put to shame even some of the 5-star hotel facilities in India. I never found a dirty public toilet anywhere in Beijing.
16. One cannot leave Beijing without the experience of getting a foot massage. This massage which is a combination of acupressure therapy and ayurvedic massage does wonders to the body through the foot. The one and a half-hour message is very soothing and on the last day of my Beijing trip after the massage I caught the midnight flight to Singapore and so slept like a log on the plane. Usually I am unable to sleep on the planes.

November 2007. [HOME](#)

Photos



AKR giving his lecture



Beautiful conference site



AKR being interviewed by China News Agency