

Taxis â€“ Chinaâ€™s Deep Throats

Contributed by Our Correspondent
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Bedroom antics in Beijing, stocks and property in Shanghai

It is a miserable winter evening in Beijing, wet and freezing, and the taxi matches the mood – a rickety Charade, the floor covered in dust and the seatcover reeking of a hundred bottoms.

We are driving along Wangfujing, Beijing’s main shopping street, past the Crowne Plaza Hotel.

“The mistress of the Beijing party chief works there as sales manager,” the cabbie says. “On weekends they go to a villa in western Beijing where he keeps his collection of expensive imported cameras which foreign visitors have given him.”

He goes on to describe in detail the private life of Chen Xitong, mayor of Beijing during June 4 and later elevated to the post of party secretary. In the bedroom of the villa, the cabbie adds, Chen had a mirror on the ceiling for an instant replay of his performance.

I was too timid to publish this excellent story -- but, several months later, read it in the columns of official newspapers that announced Chen’s arrest.

It was the most dramatic example of a scoop from a Beijing cabbie.

In all countries, taxi drivers are an important source of news, rumor and jokes but especially in one-party states where the official media report only a small part of the truth and the public lives off rumor and gossip. In Beijing, cabbies work in the shadow of the government and the party. The city boasts more officials, local and national, than any other city in China and their limousines constantly take over the roads, in convoys with sirens and police outriders.

Add the visiting foreign dignitaries and the vehicles of the army, with a red letter on the number plates, none of them subject to normal traffic rules and given precedence over ordinary cars. So the Beijing cabbie is constantly reminded of his lowly place in the world.

Many refer to the party leader as the ‘emperor’ because he enjoys many of the same powers and privileges of those who ruled China for centuries. They call civil servants ‘those with black hats’; a vestigial reference to officials of the Qing dynasty who wore the hat as a sign of their office. Both are similarly remote and unaccountable.

When George Bush came on an official visit, he arrived like an emperor, with the streets cleared for his arrival and a convoy of 55 black official cars. In the center were two limousines, one carrying Bush and one a look-alike, to make it difficult for a potential assassin.

One of the perks of being emperor is the right to concubines, of which Chairman Mao made full use. Jiang Zemin had two, according to the street talk, one a singer and the other a television presenter. His favorite was the singer, a beauty from Hunan named Song Zuying, whose tapes you could buy in the music shops.

The most famous story about Song concerns the night of September 11, when, in his nuclear bunker in Nebraska, George Bush is frantically calling world leaders to find out who organized the airplane attacks. Tony Blair, Jacques Chirac and Vladimir Putin all plead ignorance, so Bush makes a final call, to Jiang.

The call comes on a red telephone, reserved for the U.S. President, next to his bed. At that moment, Jiang and Song are hard at work. In the darkness, Jiang fumbles for the receiver and picks it up. Song snaps: "Ben (idiot), la deng (switch on the light)."

So it was that Bush learns the name of the guilty man.

Jiang fed such stories because of his love of showmanship — at official banquets, he recited poems in German, Russian or English, to visiting heads of state and then invited them to a side room to listen to his playing the piano and singing.

Another story has him leaving his bedroom inside the Zhongnanhai compound early one morning and chatting to the armed soldier on guard outside.

"Last night all was quiet?"

A recent arrival from the countryside, the soldier is nervous. "Yes, sir, very peaceful, not a sound." But, as Jiang continues talking, the officer realizes that he has given the wrong answer.

Finally, he concedes that the night was not quiet at all but had been full of the sound of joy and pleasure.

After I moved to Shanghai, I was keen to keep up to date with the private life of Hu Jintao, who replaced Jiang as party

chief. So I asked one taxi driver in the city for the latest news.

There was an awkward silence – it was the wrong question. Since we were driving along a road of new apartment blocks in Pudong, I asked instead for his views on real estate.

“This block is 8,500 yuan per square metre,” he said, pointing to the one we were going past. “The next one is 10,000 – newer and with a better design.”

Politics and the intrigues of Zhongnanhai are too far from the minds of Shanghai cabbies. For them, the main topics are related to money -- the property market, stocks and shares and European soccer, on which Chinese bet heavily.

In the early 1990s, when the brave could make a fortune on the stock market, shares were the favorite subject. You could win enough to give up the exhausting life of driving a taxi. In the late 1990s, however, the market turned down, leaving thousands of ordinary people with heavy losses and a sense of betrayal and bitterness toward the regulators and those who run the firms. From 2000, the property market became the place to make money, with prices more than doubling since then.

Shanghai is a city of business, not politics. So drivers are less willing to challenge the government and the party with the bravado of their cousins in Beijing.

Ask them about the widening wealth gap, worsening official corruption and how the city increasingly resembles its pre-1949 character, they acknowledge them but accept them with a shrug of the shoulders. It is for someone else to make a new revolution. Their hope is to try to find a way out of poverty and nurture a child who will make it to a big university and land a high-paying job.

If China has a Lech Walesa, he is not in Shanghai.