

Berkshire to Beijing

Stanley Spencer, that most English and eccentric of painters, visited China just before the Cultural Revolution. Patrick Wright on a trip that mixed high art with low comedy and personal tragedy

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He is one of the most original and accomplished painters of the 20th century, and yet he is also synonymous with a peculiarly English eccentricity. He is the artist who treated Cookham, the little Thameside village where he lived, as the measure of all experience. He is the prophet of divine sexuality who, at the second post, fell humiliated victim to a fortune-seeking lesbian. When Timothy Hyman and I set out to curate Tate Britain's new exhibition of Stanley Spencer's work, we realised that we would have to fight our way through the bizarre collection of fragmentary anecdotes that now shape his memory.

Many concern Spencer's chaotic sex life, but the one that I found most enigmatic was different. It is recorded, in various memoirs, that in the autumn of 1954, this most English of painters left his home in Berkshire to visit Beijing, where he would inform Chou En-lai, the communist premier, that "I feel at home in China because I feel that Cookham is somewhere near, only just around the corner".

The very idea of Spencer in China seems inherently unlikely. Indeed, it has been suggested that he was almost certainly invited by accident, after the authorities got him muddled up with the then radical poet, Stephen Spender. That theory can now be discounted, even though Spender himself apparently described being mistaken, while in China, for both Spender and the Elizabethan poet Spenser. Behind this curious anecdote lies an unexpected story, which can be reconstructed with the help of Spencer's previously unexamined notebooks, photographs and letters, and also the recollections of John Chinnery, who joined the Beijing-bound delegation as translator and "sinologue".

He now dismisses the Spender story as "absolute rubbish" and remarks that, whatever his reputation as an idiosyncratic Englishman, Spencer knew a lot about China and its art: partly through his leftwing friend and brother-in-law, Richard Carline, who was associated with the Britain-China Friendship Association; and partly through his close friendship - since written out of Spencer's known biography thanks to the dominant cult of Cookham - with the London-based Chinese artists, Fei Cheng-wu and Chang Chien-ying.

The story of Spencer's visit to China is characterised by the combination of high art, low comedy and personal tragedy that marked much of his life. It took place in September 1954, before Chairman Mao's industrialising "Great Leap Forward" of 1958, and when Beijing was still largely a medieval city. Spencer was 63, a celebrated senior artist, with most of his major work behind him. Along with more than 600 other figures in the arts and sciences, he had signed a statement of goodwill towards the Chinese people, instigated by a small group of communist sympathisers loosely associated with the Britain-China Friendship Association.

The Chinese authorities offered to pay for five signatories to attend the celebrations of the fifth anniversary of the communist liberation in Beijing. Spencer was selected along with Hugh Casson, the architect and exponent of postwar American mass housing; Rex Warner, a novelist, poet and classicist who had been head of the British Institute in Rome; and the philosopher A.J. Ayer, who accepted the invitation as an "astonishing windfall" though he was puzzled as to why he had been picked. The delegation was

headed by Professor Leonard Hawkes, an elderly geologist, who was also president of the Mineralogical Society and, as Chinnery laughingly suggests, the only safe pair of hands in the party.

The delegation flew from Heathrow to Amsterdam and then Prague, where they boarded a plane for the Soviet Union. On the way, Spencer drew the wing of the plane as it looked from his porthole, and scribbled a note in praise of the entrancing - and, thanks to the Iron Curtain, now also forbidden - world that could be glimpsed through a fleeting break in the clouds. At Minsk, they were put up in a collective dormitory.

Chinnery remembers Spencer looking around and asking: "Do you think it is time for me to go to byes?" Surprised, Chinnery said yes, and Spencer duly put himself to bed. Casson was tolerant of the English painter's quirky observations. In Casson's record of the journey, *Red Lacquer Days* (Lion and Unicorn Press, 1956), he describes Spencer comparing the party to a group of "deathwatch beetles" condemned only to go forward, as if they were munching their way through the roof-beams of an old English church rather than traversing the communist world. AJ Ayer was less patient. This eminent logical positivist and campaigner for secularism confessed to being infuriated by his strange, self-educated companion, whose outlook was, as Chinnery agrees, "highly illogical".

In his autobiography, *More of My Life* (Collins, 1984), Ayer would declare himself "repelled by the "eroticism and religiosity" of Spencer's paintings, even though he did not question his technical skill. He conceded that Spencer's "gnome-like appearance was not unappealing", and he was prepared to tolerate "minor eccentricities" such as his habit of wearing his pyjamas as underclothes (Chinnery confirms that Spencer's pyjama cord was, indeed, often to be seen dangling down in front of his trousers).

But Spencer's conversation was too much for the philosopher. When he was not repudiating Spencer's pronouncements on art and religion, Ayer took refuge behind the defensively raised covers of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. As the party proceeded across the Soviet Union, he took up a position close to Rex Warner, who happily launched into scholastic disquisitions on ancient Greece, while also taking a low-key approach to the whole adventure - epitomised by his habit of asking, "Where's the bar?" at every new point of arrival.

Ayer described Spencer as "the most self-centred man I have ever met", mocking his incessant allusions to Cookham and his habit of "referring to various women by their Christian names and recounting episodes in his biography as if we had taken part in them".

As Chinnery recalls, the women on Spencer's mind were his two lost wives: Hilda Carline, whom Spencer had married in 1925; and Patricia Preece, for whom he had left Hilda disastrously in 1937, giving her his house, showering her with expensive gifts, and then, very shortly after they married, finding himself kicked out so that Preece could resume her now financially improved relationship with her lover, Dorothy Hepworth.

Spencer loved Moscow, writing to friends that his long-standing desire to tread on Russian soil, so long imagined through the works of Dostoevsky, Chekhov and Turgenev, was now completely fulfilled, and that "politics has nothing to do with it". They saw new skyscrapers going up like rockets, thanks to the women labourers who, as Ayer noticed from his hotel window, "tossed bricks around from dawn to dusk". They visited the Kremlin, where Spencer, as he wrote in a letter to Dickory Frank, felt tears in his eyes as he admired the Cathedral of the Annunciation and the Cathedral of the Assumption, both within the Kremlin walls and distinguished by their medieval icons.

They twice attended the Bolshoi theatre, where they saw Verdi's *Aida* ("simply magnificent") and Prokofiev's *Cinderella* ("very lovely music with great, sweeping themes"). One evening, while visiting an agricultural show, they came across some prodigious rams. Chinnery was surprised when Spencer pointed to their huge dangling testicles and remarked that, with equipment like that, he might have done better with Patricia Preece.

Airborne again, Spencer sketched a little boy asleep in the arms of his mother, praised the scent of wild thyme in Siberia, and imagined that he and his fellow delegates were a party of "unborn kings in the body of the plane", waiting to be "baptised" before emerging into the world outside.

For Ayer, Spencer only brought further irritation in Beijing. He remembered him sitting at the breakfast table in the Foreign Delights hotel, berating the waiters in pidgin French when they failed to supply him with bacon and eggs. In fact, as Chinnery recalls, that bad-tempered outburst actually occurred when the waiters brought the customary three boiled eggs rather than the single one the painter had requested. Spencer was there with the other delegates when they presented their statement of goodwill to the Chinese People's Association for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries; and he attended the reception with the premier, Chou En-lai.

Chou informed the visitors that the Chinese were a home-loving people: "So am I," said Spencer. "It took China to get me away from Cookham." (Gilbert Spencer recounts this moment in his book, *Stanley Spencer By His Brother*, 1961). But Spencer was not at ease with China's surging blue-clad masses. He managed the banquets and receptions, at which the visitors ate sea slugs, fish lips and Beijing duck. He saw the young Dalai Lama, then being toured round the People's Republic in a "gesture of friendship", and witnessed the formal election of Mao Zedong as chairman. Spencer admired the temples, gardens, pavilions and soon-to-be-demolished wall of old Beijing, and also the magical courts of the Forbidden City. He visited the Great Wall of China, sketching Buddhas and distant views in his notebook, alongside gnomic thoughts such as "wandering people cease their steps".

But stately military parades offered no attraction for the artist of the Sandham Memorial Chapel at Burghclere, who had gone to such lengths to find a vision of peace and resurrection in his memory of the first world war. Casson records Spencer ducking out of the National Day parade on October 1, pleading his dislike of the crowds as he left the others, including Ayer, to stand there for hours watching "the military ironwork clattering by".

While Ayer lectured Chinese philosophers on logical positivism and Rex Warner entered and won a drinking competition with the famously bibulous translator Yang Xianyi, Spencer drew in the studio allocated to him at the art school and met Chinese artists, including the great nonagenarian painter, calligrapher and seal carver, Qi Baishi (Chi Pai-shih). He left some money with an official of the Chinese People's Association for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, asking him to buy some of Qi's works and mail them on to him in Cookham.

Yet, in a deeper sense than was intended by Ayer, Spencer was indeed a peculiarly "self-centred" visitor to China. When all the official business was over, he found his own uses for the trip as an autobiographical artist who, in a note written 20 years previously, had recorded his wish to write the story of his life as if it were a wandering existence, both physical and mental, like "a journey to China".

During the course of the visit, Spencer found it impossible to combine sightseeing with painting. So, in October, after Ayer and the other British visitors had returned to their teaching jobs in Britain, he stayed on with Chinnery for 10 days and, in his own words, "did a little oil painting" in the valley of the Ming tombs near Beijing. These famous antiquities are approached via an avenue of stone figures, starting with animals - elephants, horses, dragons and camels - and then proceeding to the officials or ministers. Here he painted two oils: one, showing the stone camels, called *Ming Tombs, Peking* [Beijing], the other of the officials, called *The Ministers, Peking*.

Spencer surveyed all Russia and China in a strange spirit of recognition: "As I drove along the roads from the airports to the towns it was almost comic to see these dreams of mine coming true on either side of the road."

He provided some definition of these "dreams" he had seen in the valley of the Ming tombs shortly after returning to Cookham from China. In November 1954, he wrote a letter to Hilda Carline, who had divorced him in 1937 as he took up with Patricia Preece, wishing that she had been with him on the journey.

Transposed to the Mongolian steppe, she would have been surrounded by "hundreds of miles of nowhere", in a world where "the only happening is yourself". Spencer also reminded Hilda of a comparison he had made some years before his trip to China. Writing to her in 1948, he had recalled how they had longed for marriage in the 1920s. They had once glimpsed a great plain through an opening in the road at Wangford - the Suffolk village where Hilda had served as a land girl in the first world war - and imagined this "vast Gobi desert of you" as the prospect of their future togetherness, its distant "shapes and forms" suggesting "various parts" of the life they would share.

On returning from China, Spencer wrote to Hilda again, reminding her that the plain at Wangford had been their "place of the Ming tombs". They had seen photographs of these great imperial statues, and had felt that "our together selves was like the remoteness of these animals".

As these letters suggest, Spencer's paintings of the Ming tombs are strangely autobiographical images. They show the enigmatic remnants of a lost age and its promises: cracked and abandoned in an apparently parched and desertified landscape. They are regretful images of the "shapes and forms" that might have lived, had Spencer's first marriage lasted, or had his attempted rapprochement with Hilda Carline ever come off.

It is characteristic of Spencer that he could journey to the other side of the world and still find himself curiously at home. Sadly, Hilda Carline would never receive her former husband's explanation of his Chinese paintings, nor any of the countless letters that he continued to write her. She had died in 1950.

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