**Mao’s Mausoleum and the Lincoln Memorial**

**-a diary entry from the summer of 2010, reworked**

You land in Beijing and you realize that things are different! More than being a round-eye in a land of 1.3 billion Chinese, the leaves on the toothpaste tube aren’t for mint. They are for tea flavoring in the paste. Some of the gum tastes and smells like beef stew. Dog and donkey are on some menus. These differences are superficial though; they mask a deeper set of differences that you begin to discover if you begin your travels to China in earnest in Tiananmen Square.

For the Chinese Tiananmen Square is a focal point for all that is China, past and present, and for the visitor it is the place to begin to see China from the Chinese perspective. China’s emperors, robed in silken and gold gowns and claiming their power from the Heavens, entered the Forbidden City, the seat of imperial power, from the Square by passing through the Tiananmen, which means simply gate in Chinese. A portrait of Mao, stoic and serene, hangs on the façade of the Tiananmen today. Modern China, free from foreign powers and corrupt warlords, was born in Tiananmen Square in October 1949 when Mao declared the people’s revolution victorious. Mao’s Mausoleum, drab institutional architecture that it is, sits near the center of the Square as tribute to the man who liberated China. Finally, as one walks in the Square one can’t help but ponder the student protesters who strode over the same ground in those protests that ended violently in 1989. History the way that Chinese feel it, in which the old and the new, all melded together in a seamless whole comes together for the visitor to Tiananmen Square. It is a place where according to the Chinese “great events happened.”

The Square itself has the feeling of being a boundless space. It is huge and its size is hard to appreciate from any pictures that you will see. The column in its center, which is dedicated to the People’s Heroes, is dwarfed by the vast space around it even though the column is quite tall; from most vantage points in the Square it barely pierces the sky. The buildings surrounding the Square are at such a distance from each other that they barely confine the sense of openness one feels when strolling in the Square.

I found myself trying to understand the Square by comparing it to the Mall in Washington D.C. For both, institutions of government, museums, and memorials to honored leaders border the open space at once blending governance, history, and dedications to past leaders to a civic space. Each of the spaces evoke different meanings for different generations and thus serve as a place where the entire nations find common cause in a single locale even if for different reasons. For the very old Chinese, a visit to Tiananmen Square is a chance to celebrate the birth of an independent China. Mao declared China free and under Communist rule in front of the Tiananmen in 1949. For those born later, say in the 1960s, who remember Mao and the national mourning that followed his death, the Square is a place where Mao rather than the Revolution is commemorated and remembered. The very young come and visit Tiananmen Square as a place of great national significance where history has been made, a place touched by emperors from many dynasties, and the place at the center of national celebrations and the center of governance. The Great Hall of the People flanks the Square on its west; the Chinese national history museum is across the way on the east of the Square. The young come to the Square and visit Mao’s Mausoleum as others do but more out of curiosity and obligation than out of devotion. Particularly with the changes brought about by Deng and simply the passage of time, Mao seems out of the mainstream of Chinese society today and is receding deeper in the people’s consciousness and becoming history. People use the word “mistakes” almost as much as they do “greatness” in polite conversation if Mao comes up. Interestingly, the student uprising of 1989 has not shaped young people’s images of the Square as far as I could tell. There seems to be real ambivalence about the student protests and there seems to be support for the government and how it handled the affair. Everyone I asked said that the students began peacefully enough but that anarchy, chaos, and murders followed which forced the government to step in and end the protests for the greater good of China in order to maintain stability. The government seems to have effectively blended the events during the summer of 1989 into the history of the Square’s already acknowledged place of national historical significance where, as I was told by a number of people, “great events from a long time ago and recently all happened.”

But beneath superficial similarities between the Mall and Tiananmen Square lie profound differences that can be seen by comparing the Lincoln Memorial and Mao’s Mausoleum. Lincoln’s Memorial is a tribute to a man but more fundamentally to the ideals of a republican people that he so artfully articulated. One comes to see Lincoln to see a physical embodiment of the man who rallied the nation around those ideals and saved our nation from division and thus preserved our institutions of freedom and self-governance. He sits in a Greek temple, which is a not so subtle reference to the source of much of the intellectual underpinnings of American democracy that the Founders so tirelessly studied when creating our institutions. Lincoln himself, sits heavily, slightly slumped and weary in a convincingly human pose. One senses the burdens that he bore as he struggled to save our nation from self-destruction so that future generations might also enjoy the blessings of liberty. He is flanked by the words of the Gettysburg Address and his Second Inaugural Address as he gazes across the Reflecting Pool at the Congress of the United States, the centerpiece of government “by the people and for the people.” The Memorial, particularly at night is awe-inspiring as visitors can approach the president who saved the Union and transformed the Declaration of Independence’s statement that all men are created equal into each generation’s calling.

Mao’s Mausoleum’s forms an axis across the square with his image on the Tiananmen gate, a gate that evokes the authority of emperors and their unlimited power. Whereas Lincoln’s Memorial is an opportunity to reflect upon the principles artfully described in Lincoln’s own words, Mao’s Mausoleum only obliquely refers to the greater struggles of the Chinese people for independence. It is fundamentally about Mao himself, the man as an icon. Lincoln’s Memorial, in a very supple way, utilizes Lincoln to personify the challenges of preserving a nation rooted in liberty. At Mao’s Mausoleum, what the viewer feels is the attempt to defy nature and preserve in human form for adulation a cult of personality. Lincoln’s image was carved in stone generations after his assassination so that Americans might remember the duty and sacrifice exhibited by Lincoln to preserve the Union; Mao’s Mausoleum that now houses him has him preserved in a grotesque fashion, waxy, under a pale light at the center of a temple to one man unto himself.

As our countries find themselves increasingly bound together by dynamic forces we must remember that our histories will not be a source from which we can find common ground. History informs a people, setting contours and context to discussions and framing choices that leaders make. It shapes culture in ways subtle and not so subtle and plays a powerful and active role in how a people and its leaders view the world and their place in it. In fact, I think our histories will only serve to reinforce our differences the more that we deal with China. China is emerging as bustling and modern but, as evidenced by the thousands waiting in long lines to view Mao in his Mausoleum, China’s history is not rooted in the same principles and ideals that we cherish and its history of authoritarianism is not a thing of the past.