



Chou En-lai poses with New Orleans newsmen Johnson (left) and Tolhurst.

What do you do when you find yourself

Face to face with Chou En-lai?

By Phil Johnson

Well, you swallow hard. And try to think fast. But mostly, you just stare.

There he was when we burst into a room in Peking, China—Chou En-lai, Premier of more than 750,000,000 Chinese. He's a little guy, slight and ramrod straight, but with the piercing eyes and cold mask of absolute authority we'd seen thousands of times on television and in magazines and newspapers. And he was staring at us.

We tried to apologize, to beg his pardon. Most of all, we tried to leave. But he cut off our escape.

He walked briskly to where we stood, stopping short directly in front of us. Then that hard mask broke into a semblance of a smile. He stuck out his hand. And in perfect English, he said "Ahht, the press. Welcome. We're so

happy to have you here."

And we shook hands. And I said something, I think, about being happy to be there.

It was that simple. And that fast.

Later, we had our picture taken with him . . . but I'm getting ahead of my story.

We had gone to China (photographer Jim Tolhurst and I) to cover the visit of House Majority Leader Hale Boggs of New Orleans and Minority Leader Gerald Ford of Michigan—and whatever else of China we could get to. We work for WWL-TV in New Orleans and we were the first non-network American TV newsmen to be admitted to the People's Republic of China in 22 years. But it took blood, sweat, tears and lots of Chinese-style patience be-

fore we were admitted. We wrote our first letter in April of 1971, on the day the American ping-pong team entered China. Our reasoning was logical—if they let in a whole ping-pong team, why not just two newsmen?

But the Chinese obviously didn't see it that way. They just didn't answer. So we wrote again in May . . . and in June . . . and July . . . and August. And in between letters we telephoned the Red Chinese Embassy in Ottawa and talked to a nice man named Mr. Yao. As politely as possible, he gave us the diplomatic equivalent of "Don't call us, we'll call you."

In September we flew off to Ottawa to make a personal pitch. We pressed the button at the Embassy. A thin Oriental voice came over the speaker: "What you want?" We explained who we were and could we please talk to Mr. Yao.

The speaker crackled again: "Mr. Yao not here. You go away." And we heard an ominous click.

I buzzed again. "What you want?" Another explanation.

"Mr. Yao not here. You go away. Come back next week." Click!

That did it. We buzzed again, and again, and again. No answer. Then, fully five minutes later, the same voice. "What you want?" And we dropped our diplomatic accent and shifted into good old Third Ward New Orleans basic: "Listen, man," we began, in just under a shout, "we just flew 1500 damn miles to get here and we're not about to go away. We told Mr. Yao yesterday we were coming. He knew we were coming. Now if he's not here, there must be somebody else we can talk to."

A pause . . . then only an Oriental "Hmmm." And we waited. Finally—click . . . "You come to 11th floor," the voice said. And we did.

We met there not Mr. Yao, but a Mr. Kao, second secretary of the Embassy. He was most polite, and listened very decently to our pitch. Then, at the end, we handed him copies of all the

letters we had written and told him we had received no answers to any of them. He excused himself, went away for a moment, then returned with an explanation. "I would not worry," he said. "I am told that we have not opened the April mail yet."

Face was saved all around. We were not embarrassed because they had not really ignored our letters. And they were not embarrassed because they intended to get to them eventually.

We continued to write and to call. And nine months afterward, fully 14 months after we first began writing, we got the word: visas were waiting for us at the Embassy. Three days later we were on our way to China.

And from the moment we landed until we left 10 days later, the Chinese could not have been nicer to us. They provided us with a car and a driver, and with Yu Chung-Ching, a member of the Press and Information Office. He spoke excellent English, with a rather old-school British accent, and acted as our interpreter and guide. He also ran interference for us when we wanted to cover something not included in Congressman Boggs' schedule. We got most of what we asked for, thanks to Mr. Yu.

We photographed operations at the Third Teaching Hospital of Peking Medical College in which acupuncture was used as the only anesthetic. It was a startling experience. One 51-year-old woman, Mrs. Chao Yu Chen, had a thyroid tumor as big as a golf ball removed from her throat with only two acupuncture needles on either side of her neck as anesthesia. She talked with the nurses throughout the operation. Then, when it was completed, she sat up on the table, stood up, allowed us to interview her for five minutes, and walked away to her room.

And we'll always remember the little 10-year-old boy, Kuo Pei Ching, who, with only one needle stuck in his cheek, had a tooth pulled without a whimper.→

Then, when it was over, he stood up and lustily sang a song praising Chairman Mao—two choruses.

The operation for the tumor, incidentally, including hospitalization, cost \$2. The tooth extraction was on the house. The prices are low because the Chinese keep costs down. Doctors' salaries are \$75 per month.

We moved around a lot. We went into people's homes as often as we could, to see how they lived. We sipped tea with Pan Shih Heun in Manchuria. He's a rice farmer, member of the August 1st Commune. His income: \$50 a month. He had a wife, three daughters and a son and owned his own home. Apparently, he was fairly well off because his two-room house had a radio and a sewing machine. And in the yard outside, he had three pigs and a flock of ducks.

His urban counterpart we met in Canton. He was Yu Shen Tien, and both he and his wife worked in a rubber factory, making tires. They, together with four children and a mother-in-law, lived in a three-bedroom apartment built for workers on the outskirts of the city. Rent was \$5 per month. In the apartment, in addition to the usual picture of Chairman Mao, was a radio, two bicycles and a sewing machine—sure signs of affluence.

Yu's wife, Pan Gee Dee, told us that together they earn about \$90 a month and only recently opened a bank account for their savings. Interest runs a little less than two per cent.

We visited these people in their homes and photographed their children in their schools. We were told of Chairman Mao and his miracles, and his thought, and his plans. But mostly we talked of everyday, ordinary things—of the soil and water, of rain or the lack of it, of children and of the future, which seems quite bright. One thing we never talked of was—S-E-X!

The Chinese have got to be the most puritanical people on earth. Men and

women dress in a kind of unisex: an open-collared sport shirt, hanging outside of baggy blue trousers.

We never saw a couple holding hands. Nor, come to think of it, did we see many couples at all. Mostly, boys walked together, or girls. But rarely a boy and a girl. "Chinese do not show emotion in public," we were told. Yu, our interpreter, also told us that there was no prostitution in China. "All former prostitutes now gainfully employed," he said rather proudly.

Yu was married. But he lived in Peking and his wife, a teacher, lived in Shanghai. He said this presented no problems. He got to Shanghai in his work maybe once a month. And besides, next year there is the possibility of a transfer.

Yu was typical of most of the Chinese we met—rather shy, but extremely polite and punctiliously proper. They have an exact awareness of protocol and a great sense of style. Which brings us back to Premier Chou En-lai and the night of our meeting.

We had been in Peking for three days and nothing officially had been said about the chances for meeting with the Premier. Then on our last scheduled day in Peking, we got the rather mysterious word about 3 P.M. that "something important may happen tonight." We asked Yu if that "something important" might be the long-awaited meeting with Chou En-lai. He simply shrugged his shoulders and said, "Don't know." We got our cameras and sound gear together, however, just in case.

And we asked Yu, "If this something important tonight turns out to be a meeting with Chou En-lai, should we bring our own lights, or will you have lights there for us?" Again, a polite "Don't know."

Then, about 7:30 that evening, Bill Brown, the U.S. State Department officer accompanying the Boggs-Ford party, stuck his head in the door and solemnly announced: "We have just →

received an invitation from Premier Chou En-lai to a banquet tonight in the Great Hall of the People." What time? we asked. "We are to be informed," he said. And he left.

With that our Mr. Yu rose and, looking like the cat that just swallowed the Chinese nightingale, said with obvious relish, "Well, now I can tell you . . . there will be lights tonight." But what time? we pleaded. "Don't know."

So we waited. In coat and tie in 95-degree heat we waited, with only a small oscillating fan to stir up the humid air. By 9 P.M. we had almost given up. By 10 we were asleep across our beds. At 10:30 we were awakened by Yu. "We must hurry," he said. "We can't keep the Premier waiting." So we raced through the empty streets of Peking to the immense Great Hall of the People on Tien An Men Square. Up the wide steps, across a massive foyer, then, impulsively, through that lonely door, and our face-to-face meeting with Chou En-lai.

Thankfully, after we shook hands, it was announced that the congressmen had arrived. And there was no time for small talk. Chou immediately took up his position outside in the foyer and greeted the congressmen, their wives, and each member of the party individually, and with great courtesy. Then, as if on signal, he led them all to one end of the room, furnished with a backdrop and risers. They all crowded around Chou, and still pictures were taken to record the moment for all.

Then dinner began. And what a dinner it was. There were eight courses, beginning with hors d'oeuvres of duck, pork, chicken, jellyfish, peanuts and giant sea cucumber. Then came two servings of duck, skin and meat served separately; water lettuce and sponge gourd, duck-bone soup with white gourd, millet porridge and fruit.

It was during the dinner that we realized that we—Jim and I—had not been included in the group picture. We

were too busy filming the whole thing. So we asked Ma Yu Chen, Yu's boss, if there was any way we could get a picture of the two of us with the Premier. "I'll see," he said.

As soon as dinner was over, he was at Chou's side, whispering in his ear. Chou nodded his head and walked immediately to the huge backdrop behind his table. He looked around, spotted Jim and me looking anxious, and motioned us over to his side. A Chinese photographer materialized from the shadows and the picture was taken. Another moment and Chou En-lai was gone, off with Boggs and Ford to talk until 5 in the morning.

Our travels in China covered thousands of miles, from Shanghai on the China Sea, to Peking, to Manchuria and the steel-making centers of Shenyang (formerly Mukden) and Anshan; all the way to Canton in the south. And everywhere we went the people were polite and curious. In the north it was a polite curiosity—stares from a distance. We were told we were the first Americans to visit Manchuria since 1949. In Canton, however, we were surrounded by hundreds of people, chattering about the camera and the photographer with the long hair and the reporter with the red beard.

We saw and photographed much in the 10 days allowed us: The Great Wall, the Forbidden City (the old Imperial Palace), hospitals and schools, steel mills and kindergartens, auto plants and acrobats. But our most vivid memories of China are of the people—that awesome mass of people who make up a quarter of the population of the world. Taken one at a time, they are just like you and me—they work, they play, they love and have children. They are poor, all of them. But they seem happy. And they look forward to tomorrow.

We are glad to have had the opportunity to meet them. Because we're sure we will be meeting them again and again—tomorrow. (66)