

Clear blue skies and shiny shopping malls, but Mao's corpulent corpse still presides

I went to visit Mao Tse-tung the other day. The embalmed body of the Father of communist China lies in a mausoleum in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. There he rests in his trademark grey suit — the same grey as Beijing's toxic 21st-century skies.

I expected to find a long queue of people waiting to see the still corpulent but very pasty-faced Mao, who lies mostly hidden under a red flag, but there were only a few. Mao is no longer Tiananmen Square's star attraction. Instead, a giant digital clock counting down the days to the Beijing Olympics Games now draws more attention. Hundreds of squealing, excited Chinese, including many teenagers wearing tracksuits with the word 'sport' stitched on the back, had gathered around the clock to get their photo taken. Perhaps I should not have been surprised that Mao's red star has faded. Some 40 per cent of the Chinese population was born after he died in 1976 and the majority of them have always been more capitalist than communist at heart. Under Mao they were forced to deny it, but now, unleashed, they would pick shopping malls over mausoleums any day — especially the 17.5 million that live in Beijing.

I shuffled past Mao wondering what he would have thought of modern Beijing, this wealthy city that now surrounds him with shiny office towers, hotels and apartment blocks. In his era it was a low-rise sprawl of *hutong* houses with curved eaves, stretching as far as the eye could see. The people, bitterly poor, moved about on bicycles; the Mao suit was the must-have fashion, but only for lack of choice.

Beijing began to evolve when Deng Xiaoping ushered in economic reforms after Mao's death. The city's real transformation, however, occurred after 2001 when it won the bid to host this year's Olympic Games. China's communist leaders went on a £20 billion spending spree to give the capital a makeover and ensure that what the world sees for the 16 days of the Games this August is a dazzling city that reflects a newly ascendant empire. Yet Beijing's expensive facelift has alienated locals such as Sha Guozhu, 78, who worries that futuristic buildings like the controversial China Central Television headquarters are destroying the city's heritage. Sha's generation is struggling to keep up with the blistering



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pace of change. Since 2001, the city's GDP has grown by 144 per cent.

Sha lives less than a kilometre from the Olympic Green and like many Chinese he's mad about the Games, even if he can't name one of the 28 sports that will be played. 'I never imagined I'd live to see China hold the Olympics,' he beams from beneath his Nike cap. Sha's enthusiasm for the Olympics does not stem from love of sport; rather it is rooted in patriotic fervour. Through the state-run media, the leadership has elevated the Games to a source of immense national pride. Sha wants to attend an Olympic event — after all, the party is right on his doorstep — but he has no clue how to obtain tickets. And even if he did, he couldn't afford such a luxury. Nor can most people in Beijing, who are increasingly anxious about the rising prices of food staples such as pork and cooking oil. Inflation is running at a 12-year high — it hit 8.7 per cent in February, almost double the official target. If it nudges any higher, there could be unrest.

For many Beijing citizens the Games are a sideshow to the biggest and most important change in their lives: the revolution in the city's transportation network. Beijing's public transport had been neglected for years, burdening residents with long, grim commutes. But after the city won the Olympic bid, its subway network was rapidly expanded; more taxis and hybrid public buses were added to the city's streets, and the airport got a stunning new terminal designed by Lord Foster. Now there are plans to make Beijing's subway system the world's biggest by 2015, stretching 560km and surpassing the London Underground (in length, that is; almost every subway in the world already surpasses London's in reliability and comfort).

The upgrade of Beijing's public transport

system was also meant to improve the city's noxious air. Officials secretly knew this was not possible, however, as long as they continued to approve the addition of 1,200 new cars to the city's roads every day — not to mention new factories. Still, they promise, Beijing's skies will be clean and blue during the Olympics. They have taken extreme measures to ensure this happens by ordering the temporary closure of thousands of polluting factories and dust-creating building sites, and ordering cars and trucks off the roads. It's a massive logistical exercise but the alternative is one the leadership won't contemplate: the embarrassment of athletes gasping for breath and visitors complaining of foul air.

Pity Beijing's residents, though, who will suffer after the Games when factory owners and construction tycoons will urge their workforce to recoup lost time. No doubt those industries will give short shrift to the idea proposed by China's president Hu Jintao that they should pursue a more moderate rate of economic growth that would do less harm to the environment and the population. Hu's laudable idea has been around for a while but so far few are listening. China reported giddy economic growth of 10.6 per cent in the first quarter of 2008. The Olympics will showcase the country's rise as an economic powerhouse but they will also provoke hard questions about the lack of basic freedoms taken for granted elsewhere. There will be a focus, for example, on why every visitor to China must register with a police station and why China's censors block millions of internet pages. Then there's the hot-button topic of Tibet. Free Tibet protesters, who have targeted the Olympic torch relay — and in several places including London, reduced it to farce — would argue that China's human rights record is getting worse rather than better.

According to Hu, pesky foreigners who raise such issues in public are hurting China's feelings. China's leaders want us all to be dazzled by the Beijing Olympics, but convincing the world that their megapopulous nation has stepped wholly out of the shadow of Mao is proving a tougher sell than they thought. They may succeed in hiding the pollution and any sign of political dissidence for the duration of the Games, but that pasty old corpse will still preside.