

Launch of David Chipp's *Mao's Toe*

King's College, Cambridge

24 October, 2009

Marian Ramsay

I've been asked to say a few words today because of Chipp's very long friendship with my family. My parents, Alan and Margaret Campbell, were great friends of Chipp, first met in Peking in 1956, family friends ever after. My sister Helen was his goddaughter. Chipp and my parents all lived in Victoria quite close to each other in the last few years.

My own most vivid memory of Chipp dates from Peking. As a child of seven or so, I was absolutely mesmerized by the sight of Chipp in a tweed skirt, with his hair mysteriously long and wavy. He was standing on stage, merrily singing various songs in a high falsetto – including the Foggy Foggy Dew. This was of course the now legendary Revue called 'Compound Interest', put on by British diplomats in their little theatre in the old Embassy compound.

From the book, I now learn that Chipp had a major part in the Revue, playing a lady from the Women's Institute, sent out to China by the British Council to lecture the Chinese on the art of making porcelain. Another of Chipp's roles in the revue – as told to me by one of the cast not here today – was that of a handsome couturier, judging a fashion parade of models. The cast consisted mostly of young diplomats and their wives, including my mother – and, from a child's point of view, it was all a hugely fascinating display of grown-ups being silly. I had never been to a play before, and with my sister Louise I went to every single performance – all three of them. You'll find a wonderful photo of the cast in the book showing the youthful faces of diplomats many of whom were later to become distinguished ambassadors.

From the book, I discover that amongst local Chinese who were in the audience for 'Compound Interest' was a man later to become vice minister of Culture and was himself a noted actor, Ying Ruocheng, who acted in Bertolucci's film, *The Last Emperor* (1987). When in London for the gala performance, he told Chipp and a group of friends:

'Chipp is an excellent actor, and was clearly well taught at Cambridge. His drag act on stage in Peking was among the funniest things I have ever seen.'

I can't help thinking that Chipp's sense of humour and lack of self-importance must have beguiled many an unwary interviewee into saying much more than they intended to him.

Chipp was in China from 1956 to '58 representing Reuters. Unbelievable as it seems today, during this time he was the *only* British journalist in Peking. What a time he seems to have had. The contacts high and low, the range of Chinese friends, the wonderful variety of Chinese food. As a journalist he seems to have been much freer than the poor British diplomats, who were tightly controlled by the Communist authorities, segregated from all, except official, contact with the Chinese people.

And somehow Chipp managed not to arouse the anger of these authorities, and to send a stream of accurate, perceptive reports back to Britain. This was of course a period when Chairman Mao, the Great Helmsman, was in total control. Chipp describes the primitive means of communication at his disposal – not quite carrier –

pigeon, but just the post or telegrams. There were no phone lines at all for Westerners to Europe. Nor incidentally do I remember any radio, TV or films – though there was Chinese opera. And everywhere, on all buildings, huge posters of the face of Chairman Mao, and everyone wearing identical blue boiler suits, everyone riding bicycles, or sometimes pedicabs. Cars were almost non-existent. My parents were unusual in having a small family car for trips – which had an extraordinary end. To my parents' astonishment, it was bought from them by the Chinese government itself, to be used as a prototype for a car for the People. Hundreds of thousands were produced.

Throughout his time in Peking in the '50s, Chipp lived in a hotel, handily central, and just down the road from the British Embassy compound. I was a bit surprised to read in the book that he felt he had to keep his distance from the British in case he was taken to be a spy by the Chinese. Weren't all foreigners thought to be spies? I remember my parents warning us that all the servants were probably spies. Despite the spy problem, Chipp contrived to spend quite a bit of time with his British diplomatic friends on theatricals, Scottish country dancing, tennis, and also picnics.

Family picnics to the Great Wall were prized special events, because they needed a permit from the authorities, rarely given out. They entailed a long sick-making bumpy car journey in our tiny Ford – yet somehow we must have all crammed in, because the book has a picture, taken by Chipp, of his friend the legendary Australian journalist Dick Hughes – standing on the Wall with my parents, and a tiny child. The very last time I saw Chipp, he produced it and asked if it was me – hard to say, but I think actually it's my sister, Louise.

Dear Chipp – such a kind friend to so many. It is hard to believe that he is isn't here with us, so keenly was he looking forward to the publication of this book – and I would like to say on behalf of us all how heartily we congratulate Chipp's friend, Damien Freeman, on the immense care and effort he has put into editing a great mass of material into this very handsome book. And wonderfully wide-ranging it is, above all about people, about personalities – but including too, I'm glad to see, Chipp's recipe for syllabub, and his special Cambridge version of the Toad song, as well as extracts from his commonplace book. Aptly, so many of these are about friendship, including a favourite, by that great Roman orator Cicero, written over 2,000 years ago, about 'that best and most beautiful upholstery of life':

'When a man thinks of a true friend, he is looking at himself in the mirror. Even when a friend is absent, he is present all the same. However weak he is, he is strong. Even when he is dead, he is alive. He is alive because his friends still cherish him. And remember him. This means that there is happiness even in his death- he ennobles the existence of those who are left behind.'

So let us raise our glasses... to Chipp and friendship...