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Discovering 'awesome' Beijing

■ The first of a two-part series

BEIJING: "Simply awesome!" That was what I concluded after my five-day visit to Beijing recently.

I was impressed by the vast progress that I came across in this city of the People's Republic of China including the majestic buildings, super highways, magnificent and spectacular heritage sites.

Not to be left behind, were the people that I met during the visit.

In contrast to what I had heard before, Beijing, the administrative city of the world's most populous country, was relatively safe, vibrant and certainly a showcase of immense development and progress.

The 12 degree Celsius ground temperature as announced by the captain before flight MH370 touched down at 6:55 am on April 22 (local time and Malaysian time is almost the same), was definitely a huge relief as compared against the sizzling hot day in Kuala Lumpur that the aircraft departed from six hours earlier.

It was a smooth affair at the airport, right from the immigration checkpoint to the stage where we collected our baggage. In the same flight were Cheo Nyuk Yan, the senior feature writer from Nanyang Siang Pau and Tee Shiao Eek from Unicef, Malaysia. This writer and the duo were on their way to the two-day Media Leaders Seminar on HIV and Aids here.

At the immigration gate, there were small buttons located in front of the counter which allowed you to indicate whether you were satisfied or the otherwise with the service rendered.

A guy before me apparently was amused with the buttons and I caught him pressing one with a smiling face as he hastily left the counter. Like him, I too pressed

the similar button. The officer was courteous. As the crowd was smaller in the early hours of the morning, there was not much hassle clearing the immigration gate to exit from the airport.

Once we hit the road after taking a taxi from the Beijing International Airport, located 32 km northeast of the city centre, I could see the traffic volume building up. It was past 7 am.

The expressway to the city centre was lined with trees and most of the road signs were in Mandarin and English, for non-Mandarin speaking tourists.

The trunk roads or highways were wide and at certain points criss-crossed each other.

According to a report by the Chinese news agency Xinhua in 2007, Beijing then had more than 1,100 km of national highways linking it to other cities like Shenshen, Harbin, Ghuangzhou and Kunming.

One thing for certain, you could not escape hearing motorists honking each other as they rapidly switched lanes. There were times when I just cringed upon seeing cars coming too close to the taxi that we were in.

Nevertheless, the taxi driver apparently was so used to this 'too close for comfort' situation as he too began to honk and speedily drove on. I thought about the impatient drivers I had to endure in Kuala Lumpur and apparently there were a lot more here in Beijing!

I read that there were some 3.56 million cars in Beijing as of Feb 14 this year. According to a tourist guide I met later, as one of the measures to control the volume of cars in Beijing, authorities imposed restrictions on cars bearing certain registration numbers from entering the city on certain days.

As I switched my sight alternately to both sides of the roads, the majestic Beijing National

Stadium or popularly known as the Bird's Nest Stadium, used during the 2008 Summer Olympics and Paralympics came into sight.

Even from afar, one could see its phenomenal size, the US\$423 million stadium, dubbed as the world's largest steel structure!

As we got nearer to the city centre, something else caught my sight. A distinctly different road scenario in most of the cities in Malaysia. Well, instead of motorcycles, people here rode bicycles!

A report I came across said there was close to 10 million bicycles in Beijing by end of 2007 and that China continued to be the world's leading producer of bicycles. Over 50 million bicycles were produced in 2007 and Chinese bicycles were being exported to over 100 countries!

Walking on the busy streets of Beijing later on I also noticed parking zones designated for bicycles and underneath one fly-over, I saw a man repairing bicycles.

Curious as I was, I made Yan (Nanyang's feature writer) asked a guy collecting money from a woman who has just parked her bicycle. The parking fee was three yuan for the whole day.

Another interesting thing was that the bicycles were not chained. They were just left there by their owners. Some were simply left on the ground, most probably were knocked down by those who had hastily picked up their bicycles.

"Bicycle is a general mode of transport in China. Not all those who use bicycles are poor but they are also not super rich. Nowadays, there are a lot of battery-powered bicycles which looks like motorcycles. It saves on petrol and there is no pollution.

"My parents ride bicycles as well and that has enabled them to send me to study in Kuala

Lumpur," said Qiao Xin, 28, who is an editor with AsiaWorks Television based in Beijing.

Qiao Xin studied at the Linkokwing University of Creative Technology, Cyberjaya in 2001 and was kind enough to be our tour guide on the last day, before I left Beijing.

Being a first time visitor to Beijing and for a very short duration for that matter, I had already made a mental calculation of what I wanted to see in such a restricted time.

Located on the northern edge of the North China Plains, Beijing (literally means northern capital) has been the political, economic and cultural centre of China for over 800 years right from the time of the Yuan Dynasty.

The bulk of Beijing's residents belonged to the Han Chinese majority while other ethnic minorities include the Manchu, Hui and Mongol.

Out of the five-day stay, I had two and a half days to spare to discover the city and even that brief time should be regarded as a 'blessing' in itself.

The other two days were to attend the Media Leaders Seminar on HIV and Aids organised by UNAids office in Bangkok.

The two-day event was attended by representatives from media and non-government organisations from Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Myanmar, Mongolia and China.

Even the sight of the venue for the seminar, the Tsing Hua University, regarded as one of the premier universities in China, was breathtaking. The current Chinese President, Hu Jintao, graduated with a degree in hydraulic engineering from this university in 1964.

The cool spring weather enhanced the beautiful landscape of this great institution which



Bicycles remain the favourite means of transport for Beijingers.

was established in 1917 from college status (Langhua College), the authority later changed its name to National Tsing Hua University (NTHU).

In fact, the site where the university stood was a former royal garden that was famously known as the Summer Palace. This was reaffirmed by Li Xiangping, the Executive Dean of the university's School of Journalism and Communication.

My second day in Beijing was actually blessed with an icy cold rain, apparently as a result of a storm brewing on the eastern part of China (saw a news report about the storm on CNN).

In the chilly evening, I could actually see vapour coming out from my mouth as I chatted with the other seminar participants while casually strolling around Tsing Hua's campus ground at the end of the day's session.

As I stood next to a lake in that cold windy evening, my memory took me back to the cold winter days I spent as a graduate student in Boston, oh, so many years ago.

China has about 1.33 billion population and in Beijing, one of the four great ancient capitals of China, the population hit nearly 19 million in 2008.

It was reported that one in four residents in Beijing was a migrant worker, signifying the pulling factor of big cities for those hoping to escape the clutch of poverty.

With such a huge population and being a super power, interestingly China has also taken steps to get its people to care for the environment.

For one, I was impressed with the cleanliness of the city. According to Qiao Xin, Beijing had always been a clean city but it was cleaner after the city hosted the 2008 Summer Olympics and Paralympics.

Another thing that caught my eyes was the recycling bins placed on the streets. I had also come across such bins at the tourist spots that I visited later on.

Apparently as of September 2007, over 600 labelled recycling bins were placed along 15

major thoroughfares throughout Beijing. On the bins were clearly printed "Recyclable" and "Non-recyclable". More bins were to be installed in subsequent years.

Another environmental effort taken by the Chinese government was the use of plastic bags. In the shopping centre where I bought an adapter, I was told that I needed to pay if I wanted a plastic bag for the item that I had purchased. As I had bought only one item and had my sling bag with me, I politely refused to buy one.

At the same store later on, as I had bought several items including some bananas and yoghurt drinks for dinner, I was asked for one yuan besides the 100 yuan I had given to the cashier.

That one yuan later on I found out was for the plastic bag to put all the items that I had bought.

On the plastic bag was written in both Mandarin and English "Please re-use this plastic bag to make our environment better." – Bernama