

PAPERS, PLEASE

By Bill Holm*

In China, I always traveled with a full pocket. I carried a white card with my photograph on it that entitled me to spend local money; I carried a brown work-unit card with a photograph that entitled me to the Chinese price for train tickets and admission into the gate of the university where I taught; I carried a green card, ditto photo, that enabled me to travel internally, stay in hotels and amuse police officers. Sometimes I was asked for my American passport, so I frequently carried that, too, and sometimes I had special letters in both Chinese and English from the *Waiban*, the foreign office (or as the Chinese understand it, "Barbarian Handler's Office") with red official seals stamped all over, further attesting to the certainty of my identity as myself and establishing almost, though not entirely beyond question, the legality of doing whatever it was I was doing or being at whatever place I was at. My pocket had nice wear from folding and unfolding these documents for ticket sellers, policemen, office functionaries, bankers, store clerks, keepers of gate keys, and, in general, anyone with a uniform or anyone who claimed to be an official who demanded to see them for whatever purpose.

This seemed more pointless, laborious and irritating to me than to my Chinese comrades, who were used to it. They carry the Chinese version of the same documents stamped with an equal number of official seals, and in addition carry a marriage license in case they want to stay at a hotel with their own spouse. The Chinese are used to folding and unfolding documents and to establishing their personal existence, their identity and their authorization on demand, daily, sometimes hourly if they are active. The discomfiture of foreigners, particularly Americans with their slow adjustment to the fact of this process, amuses the Chinese. Documents are life, as they know from longer experience than we can imagine.

"America is not all peaches and cream," I would tell them when they asked, as they continually did. "It is neither so elegant and rich, nor so rapacious and mean-spirited as you have been told or have imagined."

"For instance, I do not miss cheese, my Chevrolet, clean toilets to sit on, soft toilet paper or the New York Times, but I do miss the pleasure of telling bureaucrats who gratuitously demand that I establish my identity with paper into which part of their body they might, with my kindest good wishes, file that demand. In America," I said over and over again—with just the smallest trace of self-righteousness in my voice, "you travel wherever you please, stay at whatever hotel you like or can afford, do whatever work you wish that someone is willing to pay you for, and it is none of the police's or the state's damn business."

"I am forty-three years old," I added smugly, "and aside from a trip to East Germany, a couple of traffic tickets that required a driver's license, and the usual presentation of a passport to a customs man, I have never shown papers to a soul."

"Americans," I said, voice rising in patriotic crescendo, "do not carry papers. Indeed, most Americans couldn't even find them at the bottom of the dead-relative-photograph drawer, if a bureaucrat were silly or rude enough to ask for them."

"It must be a wonderful country," my Chinese comrades said with envious voices.

"Yes," I sighed, "that is the way it is."

I came back to Minnesota in August to start my old job, teaching English at a state college in Marshall. I ate my first pizza, fired up the rusty Chevy, bought a bag of lemons and a People magazine, paid bills by check, dialed long-distance on a mostly functioning telephone and, in general, had a fast re-acculturation before entering the classroom.

I started school on Monday and found a memo informing me that I needed to change my health insurance from fully "Aware" to partly "Aware" and to sign a few other odds and ends before getting my paycheck. I arrived at the personnel office, enrolled my teeth in Delta Dental, left a deposit slip for the Minnesota bank and was about to leave when I heard a voice ask for my driver's license. I dropped it in front of the clerk and resumed smoking.

"And your Social Security card."

"The number is right there in front of you on the health insurance form."

"I have to see the card. The original."

"You have to see my Social Security card? What in God's name for?"

"The immigration form."

"But I'm not immigrating anywhere. I'm already here."

"A birth certificate will do."

"Lost it when I got my last passport."

"A passport is fine, too."

"Do I understand this correctly? You are asking to see my passport inside the United States?"

"Yes, indeed."

"You may not do so, now or at any time in the future."

"Then you won't get paid. It's federal law."

"Are we in the United States now?"

"What a silly question! We're in Marshall, Minnesota."

"Show me the form."

The woman handed me xeroxed page 8795 from the Federal Register, "Employment Eligibility Verification," Form I-9 (03/06/87) from the U.S. Department of Justice. It indeed demanded that I produce the required identification – in her presence. She was, like every Chinese bureaucrat I met, "only doing my job" in asking for my papers and documents.

"This," I said, "is a piece of s**t, and you may see nothing. I refuse either to sign it or have it signed without my consent."

"Then you won't be paid."

"I signed my contract, and it did not require me to produce my papers. I'll continue teaching anyway, thank you."

"You will not be paid."

"So be it."

"Everyone has to sign the form -- all new employees. It's federal law. No one else complained."

"Somebody's got to be first. If I signed that form, then in ten years we'll have national identity cards carried by your own children, keyed to a federal computer. Any policeman or bureaucrat will be legally able to demand that you prove you are who, indeed, you say you are."

"You won't get paid."

"I'm too fat anyway. By the way, this is still the United States, isn't it? We haven't been annexed as a new Chinese province?"

"Just remember, you don't get paid."

No pay . . . the great American threat, before which our good sense and courage always crumble. No house payment . . . no tenure . . . no trip . . . no car . . . no salary . . . no honor . . . maybe honor lives someplace else . . .

A Chinese bureaucrat in the same situation would offer us different choices: first, thought examination and self-criticism; then, Xinjiang, Qinghai, the pig yard, the night soil bucket, no marriage, no university, a bullet in the back of the head and a bill to your family for two yuan for wasted ammunition from the public arsenal.

No papers, no pay. It's an interesting equation, and I think it has not surfaced before in Minnesota. Neither of my Icelandic grandfathers, for instance, had papers enough to work in Marshall, and if you're an old Minnesotan, it's unlikely that your grandfathers did, either. Viking wetbacks, they were.

Though Section 1324A, Title 8, of the U. S. Immigration Code was passed by Congress during my nonnewspaper-reading absence in central China, it doesn't take much thinking to figure out its rationale: it is intended, to use the vulgar cliché, to "stem the flood" of illegal Mexican labor. It also doesn't take much intelligence to figure out that if you're a Mexican laborer in southern California and know you have to sign this silly form, you will promptly dummy up an "original" Social Security card and a driver's license or birth certificate. Meanwhile, imagine Enrique Lopez, whose family has been in California since before Plymouth Rock, being abused by an officious bureaucrat because, like the rest of us, his "original" Social Security card disappeared down his Maytag twenty-five years ago. Visualize this. And then visualize the Senate debate on this legislation. As Mark Twain said, the true native American criminal class must certainly be Congress, and its behavior in this case is a nice mixture of hypocrisy, cowardice and thoughtlessness.

A friend, after hearing me in high dudgeon and confessing that he had himself signed such a form with silent misgivings, suggested that I might be more sensitive to such issues because of my recent return from China. If this is true, it is a harsh and sad comment both about me and about American citizens generally. If we have to spend a year in an authoritarian country producing papers on demand before we become sensitized to the moral and political dangers of Section 1324A, then we are already a nation of slaves, passive and agreeable, ready for Orwell's eternal "boot in the human face."

Walt Whitman, our great poet of human liberty, warned us that if we ever start producing papers and carrying cards, then we are lost. The bill won't be repealed, either in our lifetime or in our grandchildren's. Ask the Chinese about identity cards. See if they enjoy them. Then listen to Whitman:

To the States or any one of them [even Minnesota],

or any city of the States

[even Marshall]: *Resist much, obey little.*

Once unquestioning obedience, once fully enslaved,

Once fully enslaved, no nation, state, city of this earth, ever afterward resumes its liberty.

Let it not be said of us in another century that we became our own slave masters.

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