

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

CHGO-35
That elusive visa to China

27 Lugard Road,
The Peak,
Hong Kong.

November 19, 1964.

Mr. R.H. Nolte,
Institute of Current World Affairs,
366 Madison Avenue,
New York 17, N.Y..

Dear Mr. Nolte,

Six years ago, Professor J.T. Wilson, Professor of Geophysics at the University of Toronto, and then president of the International Union of Geodesy and Geophysics, spent three weeks in China. He went as a guest of the Academy Sinica, and was I believe, the first North American scientist to visit China since the Communist victory in 1949. He returned to Canada somewhat concerned about the ignorance which exists in the West about China in general, and Chinese science in particular. I was the fortunate beneficiary of both this concern, and the Institute's own interest in China, and as you know, four years ago accepted an ICWA fellowship to study the Chinese language and Chinese science.

You may recall that at that time our notions on what might transpire were rather vague. It was hoped that after two years of language study, relations with China might have improved so that it would be possible for me to spend a year or more in China carrying out research in geophysics. I completed the two years language study but despite several different approaches to the Chinese, never managed to secure an official invitation to visit China as a geophysicist.

During the past two years of negotiations I became interested in the more general problems of how developing countries use science to help their economic and social development. This led to my participation in the U.N. conference on this topic in Geneva two years ago. Since then I have been involved with the problem in a practical way here in Hong Kong, serving on a committee on science policy planning. But most of my time during the past year was spent studying the problems of scientific development first-hand in various Asian countries, ranging from Nepal and India in the West to Japan and the Philippines in the East. During all this time there was a polite exchange of correspondence with Chinese officials, but no invitation.

Then in the Spring of this year, China decided to make it easier for foreign tourists to visit some of her cities. They invited a Canadian travel agency to send a group of tourists to China for two weeks from October 5th to October 19th. It was the first tour to be invited from Canada in five years. The travel agency wrote to me in Hong Kong and asked if I would like to join the tour. I cabled my reply and was accepted as a member.

At the beginning of August the agency sent me visa application forms and said that there would be only four people on the tour. I returned the forms but two weeks later was informed that the tour had been cancelled. The agency however, sent my application forms to Peking on the offchance I could go alone. On Saturday October 3rd, just two days before the tour was scheduled to leave Hong Kong, I received a cable from the Toronto travel agency saying my visa had been approved by Peking and I could leave as planned on Monday, October 5th.

Cock-a-hoop, I rushed down to China Travel Service in Hong Kong, thrust my cable across the counter and asked for my visa. As the search through their records grew prolonged my spirits sank. They could find no trace of my name on their list from Peking. "Sorry," they said, "but until we hear from Canton you cannot go. 'Phone back later in the day." I slunk off home, and as I had feared there was still no news later in the day. "Come back tomorrow" was all I got. I went back on Sunday, but nothing, only .. "The last train for Canton leaves at 10.30 in the morning, we suggest you come down with your luggage at nine and we will try to 'phone Canton." I arrived promptly at 9 o'clock, bags packed and ready to go, but by 9.45 they admitted they had not got through to Canton and I obviously could not make it that day. They said they would telephone me as soon as they heard anything, if they heard.

About two hours later they did telephone, would I please go to the office with my passport and photographs. Off I went again. Yes, they had heard from Canton, I had to fill in more visa application forms and these with my passport would be sent to Canton. I could leave for the border on Wednesday, and if everything was in order my visa and passport would be brought to me at the border and I could proceed to China.

On Wednesday morning I crossed the Star Ferry to Kowloon. At the terminus of the Kowloon Canton railway I bumped into an old friend, an American, who had started learning Chinese with me four years ago. He looked at me and said, "Where on earth are you going so early in the morning -- Peking or someplace?" "Yes." Stunned silence. "What .. really?!" But that was the trouble, I still couldn't be really sure. I was still dangling on the end of a thin red tape.

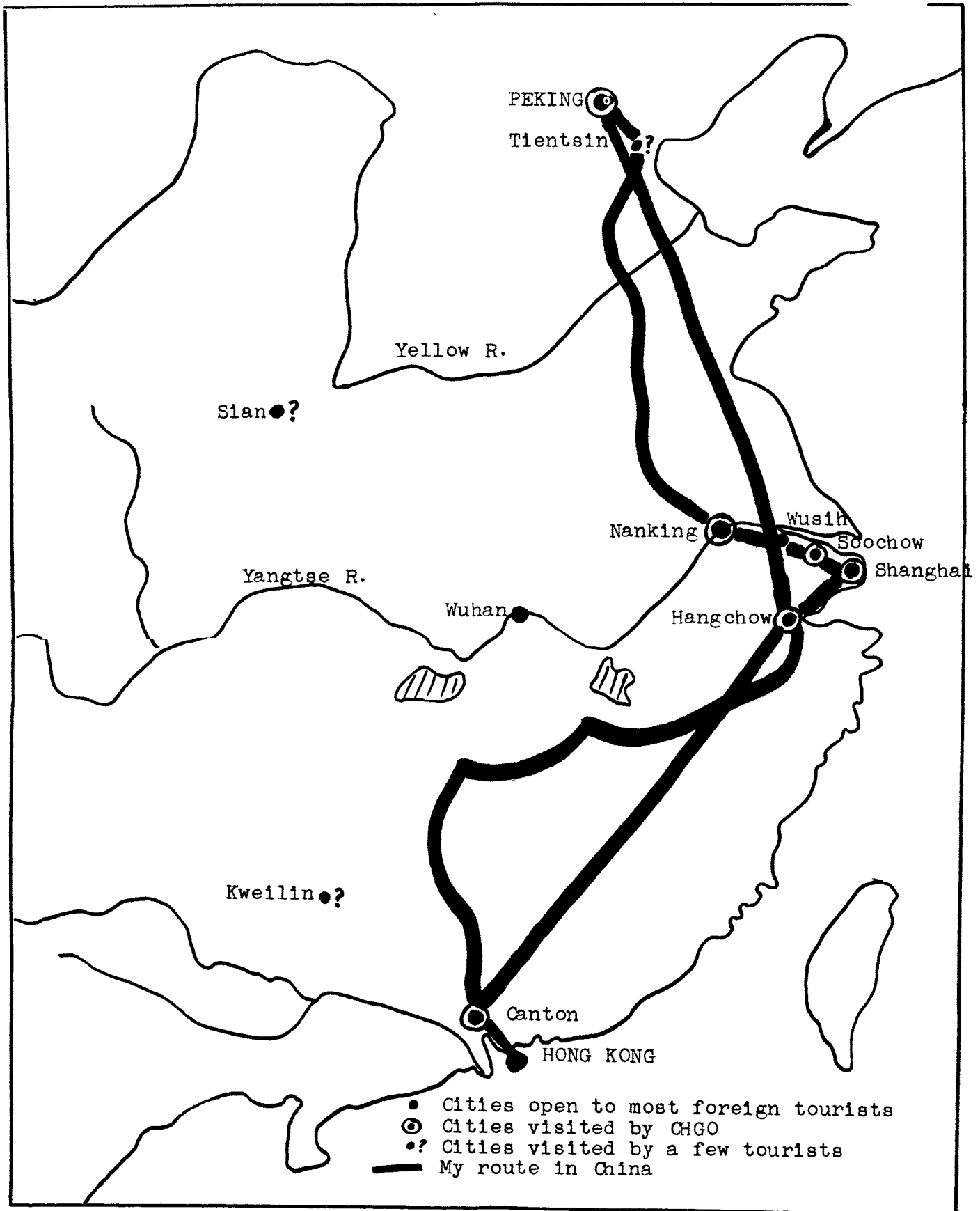
Promptly at 9.30 the train left Kowloon and I was off, at least as far as the border. For three years I had been in Hong Kong and seen people come and go. Like all people interested in China living in Hong Kong, China seemed so close and yet was so far. Was I really going to make it at last? At Sheung Shui the Hong Kong police walked through the train. This is the last stop to which someone not bound for China can ride. After that there is Lowu and the famous bridge. A few minutes later, and an hour after leaving Kowloon, we arrived at the border. A China Travel Service representative took my case and led me to a small waiting room. After a few minutes most of the foreigners were led across

the bridge leaving a group of ten Japanese members of the Chinese-Japanese Friendship Association, and myself -- on the Hong Kong side. We waited about forty minutes and then the Japanese went across. I was utterly alone, imagining all possible reasons why they might stop my entry. Maybe they didn't approve of my Hong Kong passport. It is a British passport but issued in Hong Kong, and with "HONG KONG" stamped in large gold letters on the front. Maybe they didn't want someone who could read and speak Chinese (I'd had to state the languages I knew on my application form). For ten minutes more I waited and then the China Travel representative appeared, "Come this way please Mr. Oldham." I crossed the bridge, beamed at the Chinese sentry, and was in.

There was a walk of about 50 yards along a covered walkway lined with colorful communist posters, most of which seemed to be aimed at Afro-Asian solidarity, and on into a large building to await a perfunctory customs inspection. After a lunch we boarded the train and three hours later we arrived in Canton. At exactly the right exit of the train, Mr. Chin, the China Travel Service interpreter, was waiting for me. I was taken to a car (there were three individual foreign travellers on the train as well as several groups, we each had a car of our own) and whisked off to that great mausoleum of a hotel, the Goat City Hotel. On the way Mr. Chin asked about my plans. I said I thought two weeks too short a time in which to see China and would like to stay longer. How much longer, he asked. I said a total of a month, and that I would also like to visit some other cities in addition to those on my original tour plan. He replied that a decision on my itinerary could only be made in Peking and suggested that I fly directly to Peking the following day. To this I agreed, and was delighted to find when I got my passport back that it had in fact been stamped with a one-month visa.

The Viscount flight from Canton to Peking was very comfortable, but I got off to a bad start with the China Travel representative in Peking when I arrived there at about 11 o'clock that night. He was an older man than I had in Canton and much more formal. It was cold and he was wearing the cloth cap and usual blue Chou En Lai style jacket. After greeting me off the plane, he said, "We were expecting you two days ago, you are late." At this I felt like exploding after all my efforts to get in on time, but mumbled something about difficulties in communication between Canton and Hong Kong. Then as we walked to the terminal building he said, "It's a very nice aeroplane you have just flown in." After his first rebuff I couldn't resist the jibe: "But of course -- it was made in Britain." After that, relations were distinctly icy and all the way in the car to the hotel I was bombarded with Before and After* statistics. "Before liberation Peking

* For the uninitiated, Before and After refers to before and after 1949. Depending upon one's point of view this is either Before and After Liberation, or Before and After the Revolution.



TOURIST CITIES OF CHINA

was largely a city of consumption, now we have both heavy and light industry. You, who were not here before, cannot know how bad it was, but now you will see for yourself how much we have accomplished, under the leadership of the Party and Chairman Mao Tse Tung." I was beginning to regret my jibe.

The next day Mr. Tai called on me at the hotel (Shin Chiao) to discuss my program. I was prepared for him with a sheet of paper with my requests in writing. I wanted to spend two weeks in Peking, and two days each in Nanking, Soochow, Shanghai, Hangchow, Kweilin, and Canton. I knew that all the cities except Kweilin were on the usual tourist run, but very much wanted to visit Kweilin since it has some of the most interesting examples of tropical weathering of limestone in the world. And its beauty has been made familiar to everyone by Chinese painters for hundreds of years. I told Mr. Tai of my background as a geophysicist and interest in science. I showed him the correspondence with the Academy Sinica and said I would like to pay my respects to Pei Li-Sheng, the Vice President of the Academy, in charge of relations with foreign scientists. I also asked to see Peking University, the Museum of Peking Man, as well as the more usual tourist attractions. He said he would present my requests to his head office.

It was five days later before I got all the answers. Pei Li-Sheng was out of town, and there was not time to see the University. Also my requests to visit the Museum of Peking Man, Kweilin, and to stay two weeks in Peking, were all rejected. In short I was in China as a tourist and it appeared that I would only be able to see tourist sights. Mind you, in Peking this was very exciting. The Forbidden City, Temple of Heaven, Summer Palace, Great Wall and Ming Tombs are tourist attractions unequalled in the world. Add these to a visit to a school, a commune and a special performance of the largest and most spectacular show I have ever seen, called "The East is Red", in the Great Hall of the People, plus a number of other items, and there is little to complain about for a tourist. I could only stay one week in Peking because the following week there was the World Table Tennis Championships and there were no interpreters

to spare. I argued that I did not need an interpreter, but I was paying 60 Yuan a day (\$25) and this included hotel, meals, car, driver, and interpreter, therefore I had to have car, driver, and interpreter.

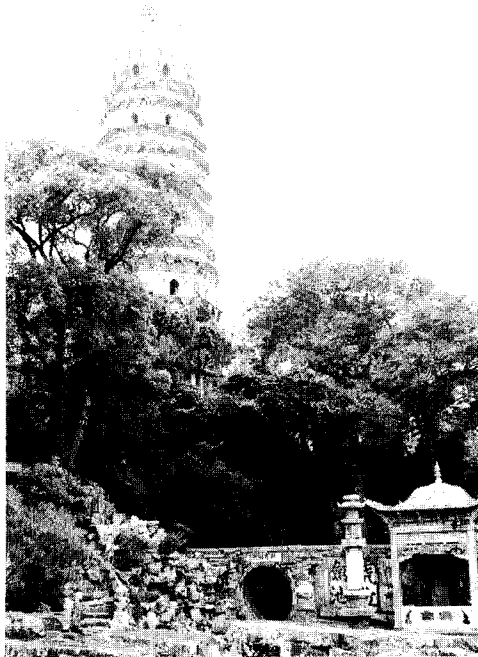
The afternoon before my departure from Peking, I was required to pay the extra charges for my extended tour and found that I was only scheduled to spend twenty days in China. My second week in



The Great Wall

Peking and time in Kweilin had been deducted, and the time not apportioned to the other places. I objected -- my visa was for one month. But it was no use, there was no time to change things again in Peking. I simply had to leave the next morning for the twenty-four hour train trip to Nanking.

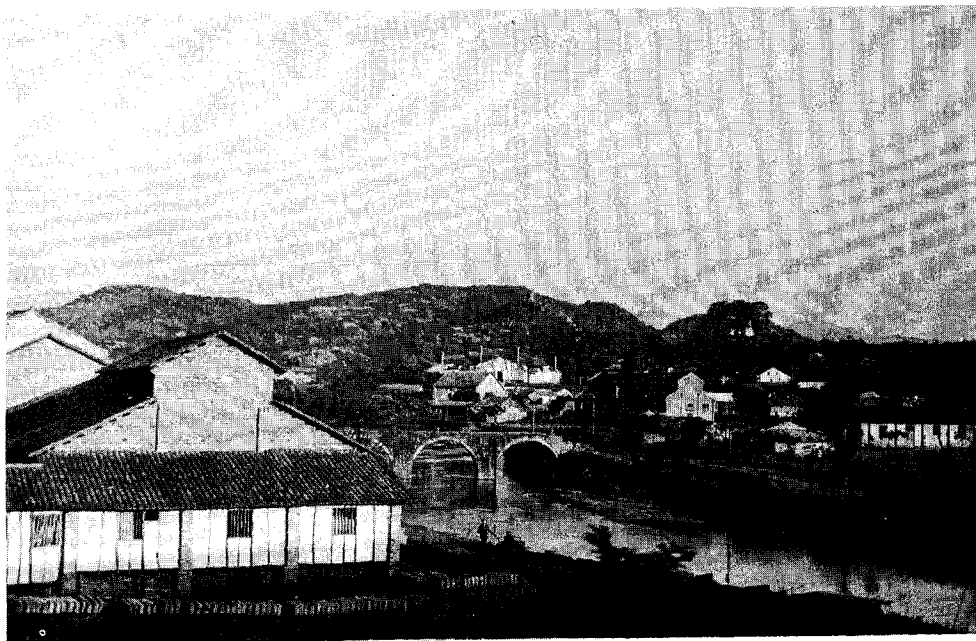
Nanking was totally different. On arrival I was taken to meet the manager of China International Travel Service and somehow or another we immediately got into a long discussion about America and Taiwan. We argued for an hour and a half and at the end he said, "I have enjoyed our frank exchange of views, please be equally frank with all the people you meet in Nanking. Now, what do you want to see?" I told him: universities and scientific research institutes, communes, scientific instrument factories, a middle school, the Purple Mountain Observatory, and the Theological Seminary. "I'll see what I can arrange," he said, "but you had better stay longer than two days." I agreed, and we worked out a new schedule -- 5 days in Nanking, 3 days in Soochow, a week in Shanghai,



Above: Tiger Hill Pagoda, Soochow.

Below: Nanking Road, Shanghai





Village in Middle Yangtse Region. Photo taken from train about midway between Hangchow and Canton.

three days in Hangchow, and two days in Canton, with travel between cities by train. To my utter amazement all my requests were granted, with the exception of the Purple Mountain Observatory. I was told the road to the Observatory was under repair and impassable at the moment.

For the rest of my trip, which lasted exactly a month, I was able to visit most of the things I wanted to see. Although only in China as a tourist I ended with a tally of: two primary schools; six middle schools; four universities; three research institutes; seven communes; three hospitals; two scientific instrument factories; four other factories; seven museums; one sanatorium; three industrial exhibitions; one theological seminary; one workers' housing estate; four films; two dance dramas; three Peking operas; two acrobatic troupes; one circus; one basketball game (All China Championship match); one childrens' theatre; three cultural palaces; and one Bulgarian folksong and dance display. All these in addition to the usual tourist sights in each place I visited, and countless hours spent in political argument and debate, left me exhausted.

I had been preparing for this trip for four years and wanted to extract every possible advantage from it. However, it was not until I had recrossed the Lowu Bridge and was on the train to Hong Kong that I realized just how exhausted and tense I had become. The story is told in Hong Kong of the man who comes around the train shortly after it leaves the border at Lowu and offers scotch and soda. It is jokingly said that one's reaction to China can be judged by whether this is accepted or refused. The man did come round and with a merry glint in his eye, asked "Scotch and soda or gin and tonic, Sir?" I replied, "Scotch, and make it a double!"

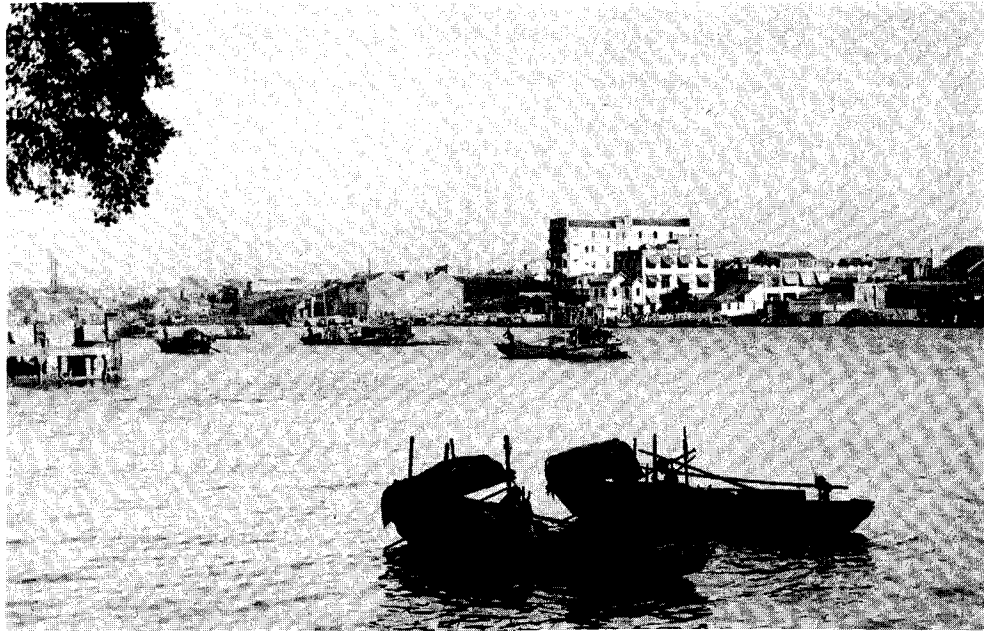
Yours sincerely,

C.H.G. Oldham

Received in New York Nov.24,1964.

C.H.G. Oldham.

The Pearl River, Canton



A Canton Park

