

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

CHGO-36
China Miscellanea

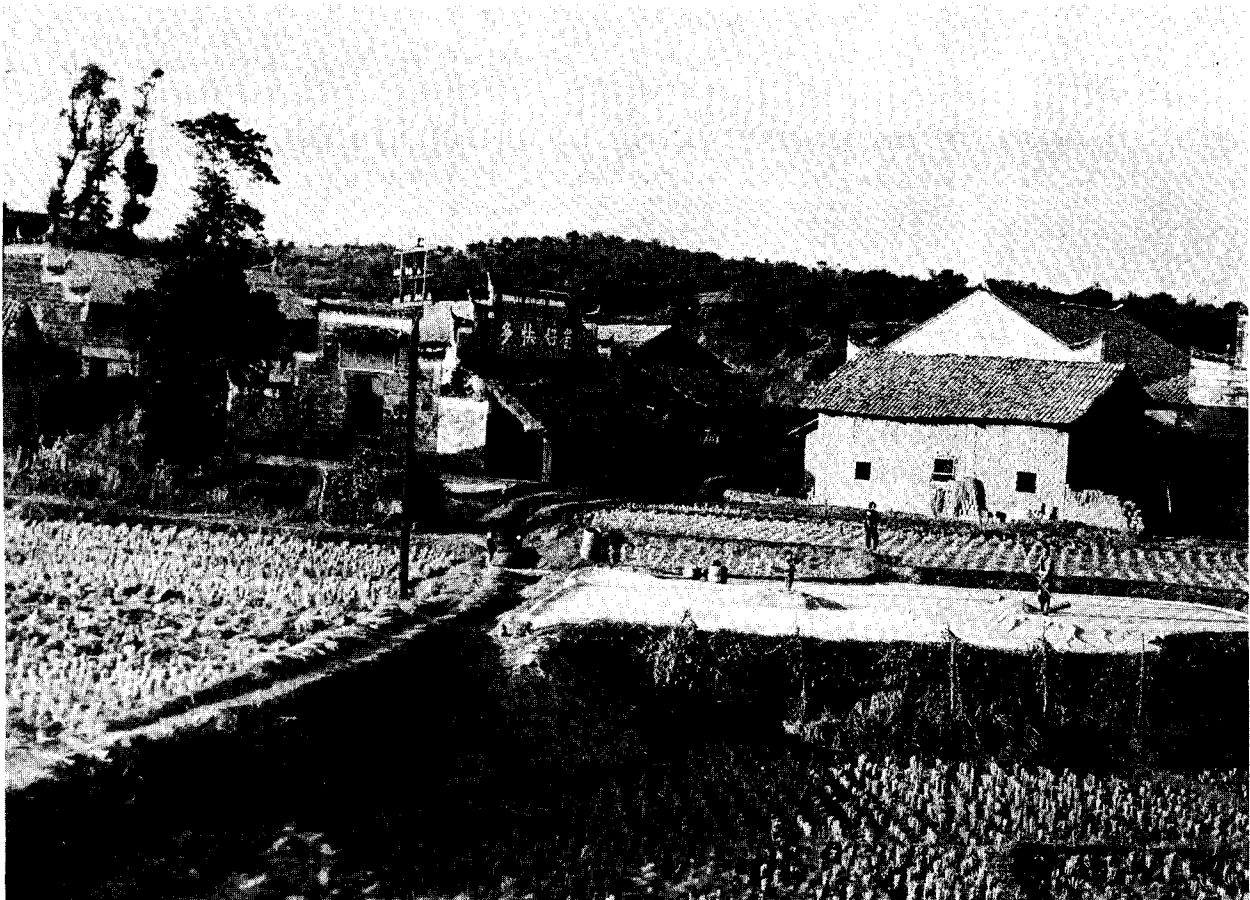
27 Lugard Road,
The Peak,
Hong Kong.

December 1, 1964.

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

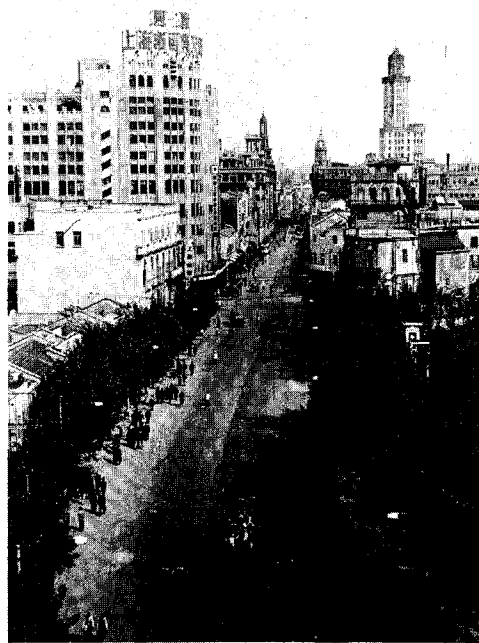
Dear Mr. Nolte,

This letter is a miscellany of facts and impressions about my recent visit to China. Its purpose is to collect together a number of loose ends which should help set the scene for more substantive letters on communes, education, entertainment, and other topics.



Village scene in the Middle Yangtse Region

First a word of caution. I was in China one month, and was able to visit only a handful of cities in Eastern China. Although I had complete freedom within those cities to wander on my own and talk to any chance acquaintance, it must be realized that what I was able to see was very superficial. Previous study in Hong Kong of the Chinese scene provided some depth, but it would be quite wrong to assume that what I saw in East China was necessarily representative of the whole of China. Also, China stirs such strong emotions in many people that it seems particularly difficult to report objectively about that country. Anyone with preconceived notions can see enough in a brief visit to convince him that his notions were correct. Someone expecting dramatic changes from the poverty and despair of old China can see plenty of evidence of great progress: water conservancy measures; electric power stations; happy children playing in newly constructed parks; policemen helping old ladies to carry heavy loads. Naturally, China International Travel Service makes certain that the tourist sees a good deal of this aspect of China. On the other hand someone wanting to paint a black picture can return with plenty of evidence for his case. Evidence of a police state, lack of personal liberties, thought reform, conformity, deserted factories, and inefficient use of labour, can all be seen, although these are not so obvious to the tourist as the good things. I will attempt to be as objective as possible, but any individual sees things through eyes conditioned by personal experience.



First of all, some very superficial tourist impressions. One of the first things to strike a visitor to any major city in China is the wide streets and the scarcity of traffic. What cars there are seem to be mainly used for transporting foreign visitors. The very scarcity of cars makes those which do exist a novelty and even in a city such as Shanghai, any empty car always attracted a group of curious passersby. In Canton, most of the cars were British, Humbers and Morris's predominating. In Peking the majority were Polish, and in Shanghai there were several French Peugeots. The other cities had a variety of makes, including some vintage Fords, Buicks, and Chryslers, dating from the mid-1940's, but all quite serviceable. I saw only three Chinese made cars during my month in China (one Red Flag, two Phoenix).

Lunch hour traffic in the main street of the second biggest city in Asia. Nanking Road, Shanghai.



Curious passersby inspect "my" car parked outside the Overseas Chinese' Hotel, Shanghai.

Tourists who pay the equivalent of U.S.\$25 a day for services tend to be a critical group. But of the ones I met in China there were very few who complained. Most thought they were getting good value for their money. The hotel facilities were all quite comfortable, although a little old fashioned by Western standards. Meals varied in quality from place to place, but were usually very good (especially the Chinese food). Service was almost always excellent.

The chief cause for complaint was the car drivers. Generally speaking they drove much too fast, constantly blared on the horn, and sent pedestrians unused to traffic scattering in all directions. They were young men enjoying powerful toys. Definitely, their attitude toward the people needed remoulding!

The interpreters varied considerably both in competence and intelligence and since they were the tourists' companions for most of the day, the enjoyment of a place depended to some extent on the luck of the interpreter-draw. In many ways the interpreter - tourist relationship is an odd one. For a week or more at a stretch one is suddenly brought into close companionship with a complete stranger -- one who is a cadre and whose political beliefs must be considered by his communist bosses

to be completely reliable. It was apparent that the interpreters met and discussed their respective charges, and I always spoke with the assumption that my comments would be duly reported. This didn't in any way prevent me from having some good arguments with my interpreters, although for the most part there was more good natured bantering than serious debating. Nevertheless, there frequently developed a sort of wordsmanship contest in which one strived to be one-up on the interpreter. I found that eventually this largely subconscious contest became quite a strain, and every two or three days I would dismiss the interpreter for half a day and just wander around on my own. I asked one of the interpreters in Nanking whether they usually had so many political discussions with their "foreign guests" (the term applied to all foreigners regardless of whether in China as a guest or tourist). He replied, no, most

of the guests in the past had been sympathetic to communism.

I can best illustrate the sort of one-up-manship contests and bantering by giving a couple of examples. I had one gambit which never failed to impress and which I would use whenever the propaganda about productive labour became excessive. I would point out that there is nothing very unusual in students working in the summer months and that I spent two months every summer from the age of 13 to 20 working in either forestry or agricultural camps. It was at a government agricultural camp that I first met my wife when we were both doing "productive labour"! I said that I heartily agreed that it was a good thing for students to get out and work on the land, only I felt that if it were made compulsory then much of the spirit and fun would be lost. I said this to my Peking interpreter as we lunched at the Great Wall. On the way back, to the Ming Tombs, he must have been ruminating about it, because he came out with what for a Chinese communist must be one of the biggest compliments he could pay (although I'm sure my parents will think otherwise!). He said, "It is very good that you spent so much time in productive labour, I suppose you must come from peasant stock." I replied, "No, Mr. Tai, I am not from peasant stock, at that time in England the majority of senior secondary school students volunteered to spend their summers helping on the land."

On another occasion, in Nanking in a tea house near the entrance to the Sun Yat Sen Mausoleum, my guide said that as a cadre he would soon have to go and do his year's stint of productive labour. I asked what would happen if he did not want to go. He replied, "I would need to have my thoughts remoulded." I asked how this would be done and suggested that I play the part of a scientific cadre who was reluctant to work on the land and that he should attempt to remould me. The conversation went like this:

Guide: Well, first of all we must ask what is the reason why you don't want to work in the commune.

CHGO: Because I believe the scientific work that I am doing in my laboratory is far more important for the good of the country. than if I were to go and work on a commune for a year.

Guide: This is taking the short term view. You would be much more use to the country if you first learn to love labour.

CHGO: But I do love labour, some of my best friends in Nanking are factory workers. I have relatives in the country and when I visit them I always spend time with the peasants. I agree I may gain a little if I were to spend a year in productive labour, but the country would lose a lot, my scientific work is in a very crucial stage.

At this my guide doubled up with laughter, "You know," he said, "I have never heard this kind of argument before -- you do need your thoughts remoulded!"

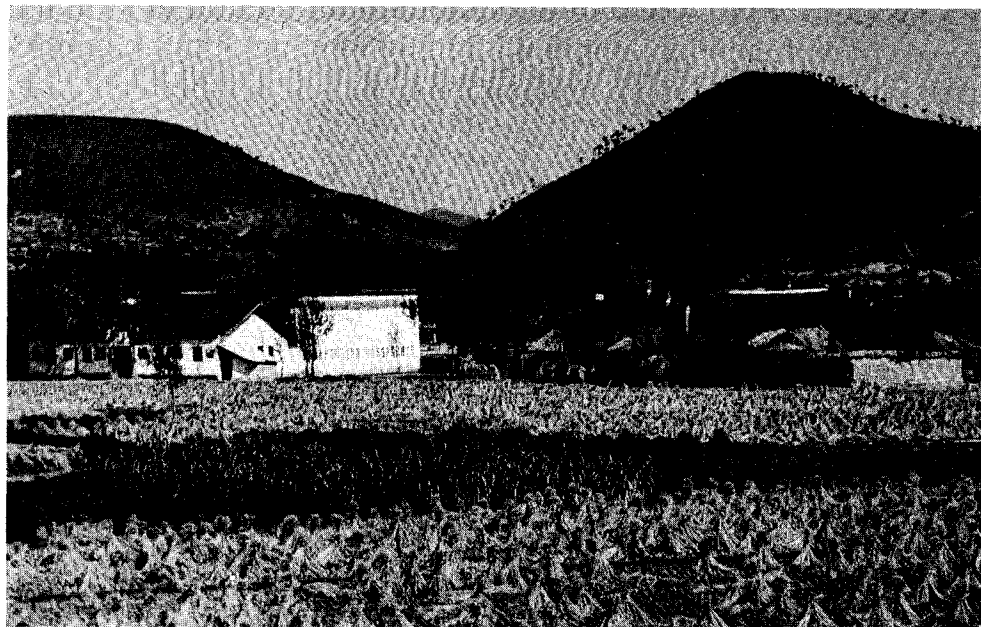
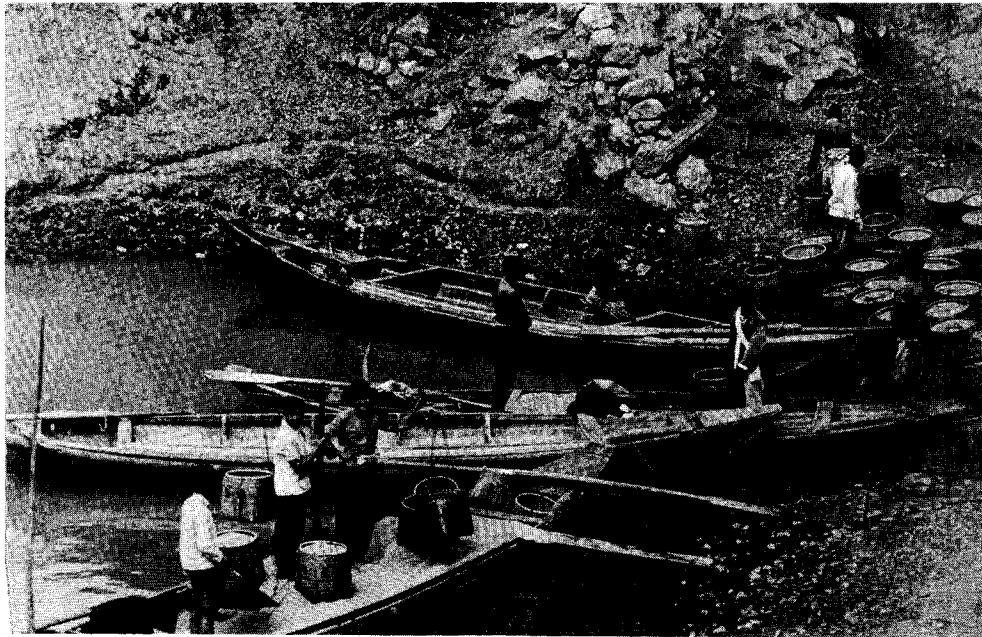
In my last letter I mentioned the considerable effort that was made by China International Travel Service to provide me

with what I wanted to see. Similar efforts were made for other tourists, and an Australian lawyer and Canadian psychologist were able to visit prisons in Nanking and Peking (not in Shanghai) and both of them attended a thought reform session in the Peking prison. The Australian tried to arrange cheap tours for Australian students, and in this connection had an interview with a senior representative of the Travel Service in Peking. This representative said that the country was losing money on the individual travellers, and that although it was intended to double the number of tourists visiting China next year, those wishing to travel alone are to be discouraged and may have to pay as much as U.S.\$53 per day.

One of the pleasantest days in China was the day I spent on the train from Hangchow to Canton. For most of the daylight hours the train travelled west or west-south-west through the Middle Yangtse Region. It was a beautiful sunny day, I had a compartment to myself and was completely absorbed by the views of the countryside we passed through. The train rolled along at a steady 30 to 40 miles per hour through some of the loveliest country I have ever seen. The Autumn harvest was in full swing and my notes for that day are full of the phrase "idyllic scene".



Women using wooden boards to thresh rice. Photograph taken from Hangchow-Canton train.



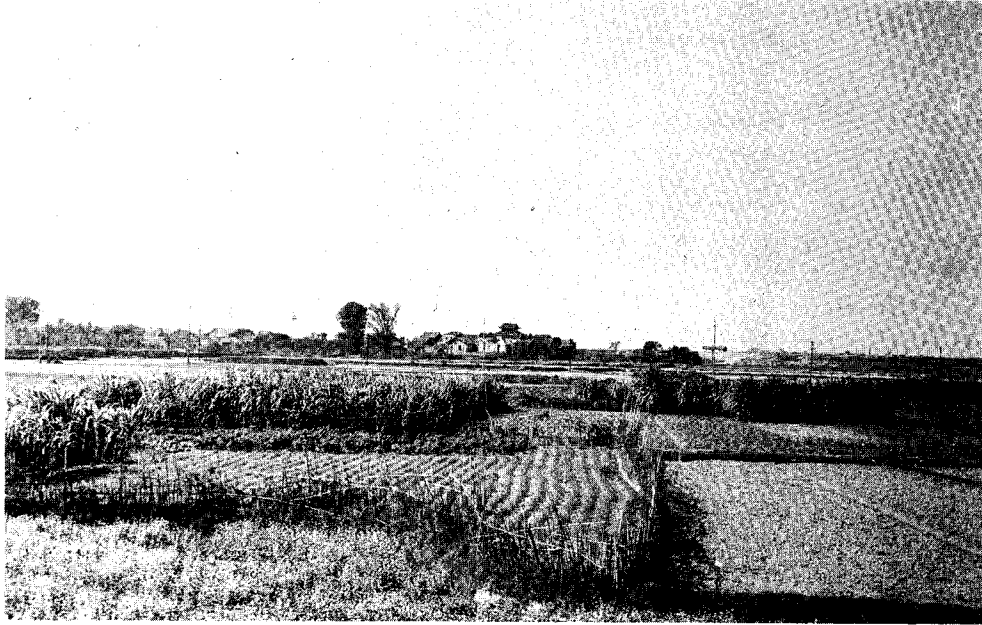
Photographs taken from the Hangchow-Canton train.

In retrospect however, I realized that the word idyllic usually relates to nature, or a combination of man and nature. It is an adjective that is rarely applied to machinery. And certainly there was very little machinery to be seen in these harvesting operations, or elsewhere in the countryside. One realizes that China is still a poor country, although I never saw the squalid poverty that I have seen in other parts of Asia.

When I made official visits to institutes I would usually work through the interpreter. I found that my Chinese, although quite adequate for ordinary useage, was liable to let me down in formal interviews where it was important to get the precise meaning. Also if I concentrated on language I did not absorb so much of the content and so after assessing the competence of the interpreter I would usually rely on him and concentrate on the subject. Never once did I find an interpreter who deliberately tried to mis-translate either written or spoken Chinese, and I always tested them out before admitting I knew some Chinese!

The routine for visits to schools, communes, universities, etc., was standard. The China Travel interpreter, frequently plus a China Travel Secretary, and I, would arrive in the car at the appointed time. Invariably the director of the institute plus a Party man, who would be introduced as dean of studies or some such title, and a secretary, would be on the steps to greet us. We would go into a committee room, Chinese tea would be served and the director would give an official welcome. There would then be a "brief introduction" which usually lasted about half an hour, and during which time interruptions were not welcomed. The introduction was frequently highly political and gave a Before and After Liberation comparison. Afterwards I was free to ask questions. My questions were always as direct and pointed as I could make them. Sometimes the director would answer, and other times it would be the Party man who would reply. I was impressed by the openness and frankness of the replies, which often were more direct than in many of my interviews with Japanese on similar topics three months before. On very few occasions was there hedging and evasion and only once am I convinced that the answer given was a definite lie. On most occasions a secretary took notes of both my questions and the answers that were given. I once asked why the secretary was taking notes, and was told it was because sometimes ideas and suggestions of use to the institution would be forthcoming out of discussions such as this. The question and answer period would last perhaps another hour and I would always make detailed, almost verbatim notes myself, then we would look around the establishment. Sometimes we would return to the room for a further talk. Although our discussions at times became extremely frank, at no time did anyone lose his temper and on a few occasions the arguments were quite rewarding.

One of the most frequent questions put to me by the "China experts" after my return to Hong Kong, was, "What did you find that was different from your expectations?" The answer is, not a great deal. After reading Ren Min Ryh Baw (The Peoples' Daily) for several years the superficial view is very familiar. In fact in many ways China was rather like a three dimensional Peoples' Daily. A few things, such as the political indoctrination of



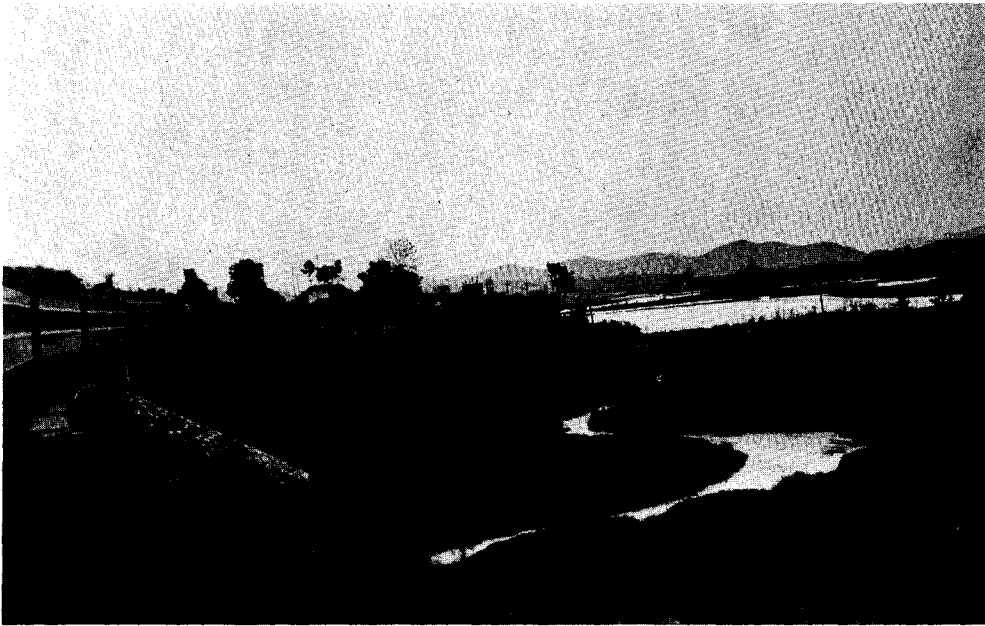
Photographs taken from the Hangchow-Canton train.



Children applaud as I visit the sports ground of Shiang Ming Middle School in Shanghai

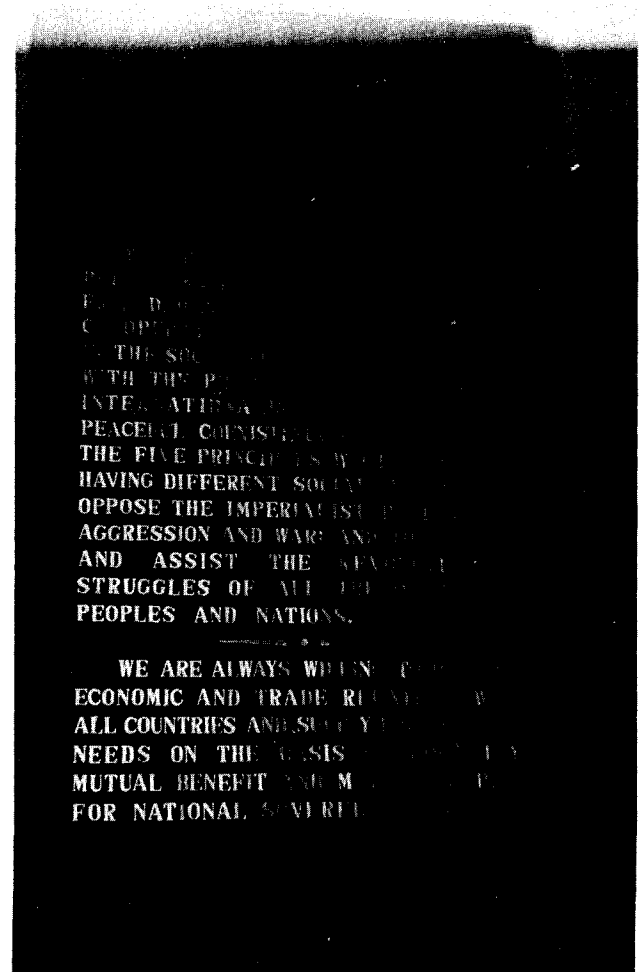
children and the efforts to bring science to the people were different in degree from what I expected, but just about the only surprises were the openness and frankness of the officials, and the friendliness of the people. Some of the friendliness was clearly "official" politeness met in visits to communes and factories. One accepts this, and reciprocates, without feeling that it means very much. What was much more striking and infinitely more rewarding was the friendship shown in chance encounters when I wandered alone in the street or countryside. Certain such encounters stand out in my memory: For example, the happy jolly crowd I met and chatted with one Sunday afternoon as I clambered up to the top of the Great Wall.

Then there were the three convivial army officers with whom I shared a four berth compartment on the twenty-four hour train journey from Peking to Nanking. They looked quite dismayed when I was shown into the compartment in Peking. "Is he travelling alone?" they asked my Peking guide who was seeing me off. But gradually their reserve melted and we chatted for much of the journey. They knew that Lester Pearson was Prime Minister of Canada, but none knew who was Prime Minister of England. One thought Churchill, another Eden, and the third, MacMillan. It was the day of the British election and I said that probably there would be a Labour Party government in power by the time we reached Nanking. "Bah!" one of them snorted, "It will still be a capitalist government." "But of course," I replied, "That is what the people want. There are several communist candidates standing for election



The Hangchow to
Canton train

Sign at the entrance
to the Canton Export
Commodities Fair



and if the people wanted a communist government they are free to choose one." He grinned and said, "It will come one day." I replied, "We will wait and see!" They mentioned Field Marshall Montgomery and thought he was a great man, they also thought pretty highly of Churchill, but clearly despised MacMillan. Later they taught me a Chinese card game and when we reached Nanking insisted on carrying my luggage and seeing me off. "Come back with your wife next year, you are always welcome," they said as we parted.

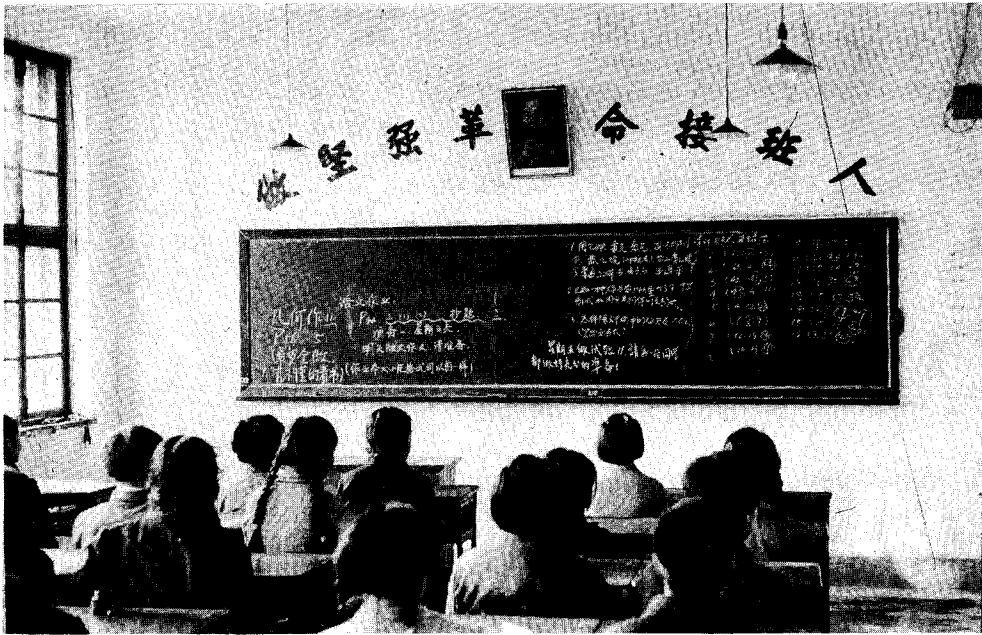
Perhaps the most rewarding encounter was with a couple, about twenty-five years old, that I met quite by chance as I went for a stroll one evening in Soochow. They bubbled over with enthusiasm at talking to a foreigner, wanted to take me to a cinema (it turned out to be full) and showed me all over Soochow. They both taught Chinese literature in a middle school and we talked for almost three hours.

Another incident was the occasion when the Australian lawyer and I joined in skipping with a group of school children in a side street off Nanking Road in Shanghai. Their shrieks of laughter and delight, the enormous crowd which quickly gathered, and the cheering, are not easily forgotten.

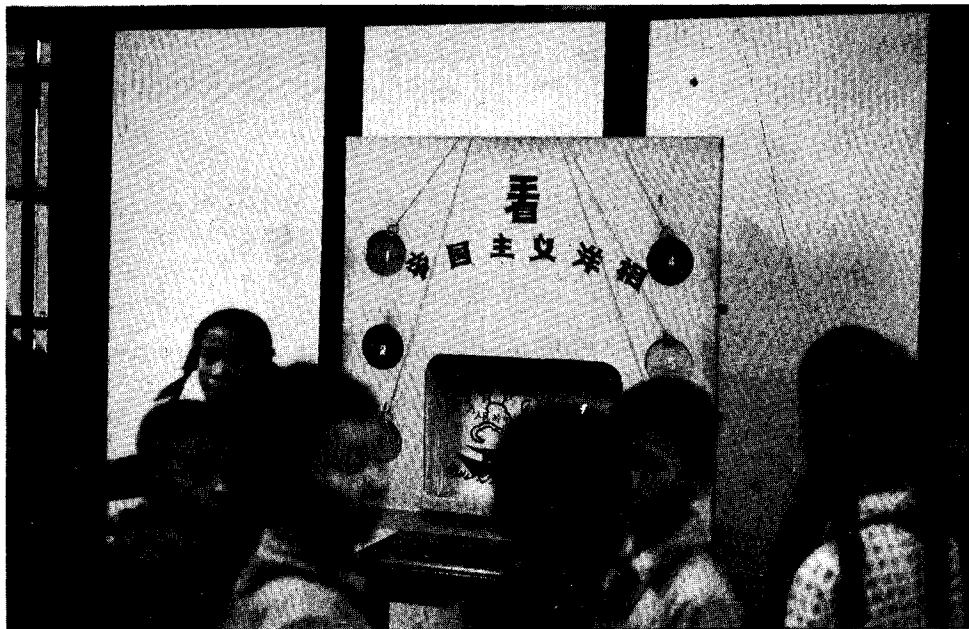
One final example: one evening in Shanghai I was taken to the childrens' theatre. There were hardly any adults in the audience and the applause from the 1,500 children which greeted my arrival and interval stroll was so embarrassingly greater than any of the applause for the show itself that I was grateful when the China Travel representative suggested we leave a few moments before the end to avoid a repetition.

This enthusiasm and friendliness toward the foreigner quite exceeded anything I have experienced in any other country in the world, and these experiences alone were ample reward for the many months of language study.

The times when I felt worried about China were when I visited schools, and I consider the political indoctrination of the Chinese children one of the most disturbing things I saw. I expressed my views to several of the Chinese educators and was told that, "Western countries realize that they cannot make any impression on our present generation of Chinese leaders but they (Western countries) say that after two or three generations capitalism will return to China. We are determined to make sure that it will not." The children are taught to be the successors of the revolution, and are constantly told what the bad old days were like. In a commune near Nanking while I was having my "introduction" I could hear applause and cheers in the next room. I asked what was going on. "Oh, that's an old peasant describing his bitter life under the cruel landlords in the old days before Liberation," was the reply. I visited a new housing estate in Shanghai and was shown the old slums which were being pulled down. "We intend to leave two to remind the children of living conditions in the old days," said the chairwoman of the street committee who showed me around. Photographic displays everywhere and frequent visits to museums are all designed to make sure the children never forget "the bad old days".



A classroom in Number 15 Middle School, Peking. Students are listening to daily political broadcast. Sign across wall says, "Be determined successors of the revolution". The writing on the black board gives homework instructions.



Anti-American game at the childrens' palace in Shanghai. The sign says, "See the absurdities of imperialism". The children take it in turn to throw a ball at the numbered circles. A hit causes a new scene to drop into place. Each scene depicts American imperialism in some part of the world. The one on view in the photograph is about Panama.



"Where is Chairman Mao?"

It was not the constant reference to the bad old days which distressed me so much as the utterly one-sided communist view of the world which is taught to the school children. Even at the nursery school which I saw in the Number 17 Textile Factory in Shanghai the nurses were asking fifteen-month old babies, "Where is Chairman Mao?" The children were supposed to point to the inevitable photograph on the wall and say, "There is Chairman Mao," and these were the first words they were learning to speak. The headmistress of a primary school in Soochow said, "All the students are taught to love Chairman Mao and the Communist Party and to hate the United States' imperialists. They learn about the poor people in Vietnam oppressed by the U.S. imperialists and know who should be hated." When I protested that it is wrong to teach children to hate any people, she said it was not the people the children are taught to hate but the imperialist actions of their government.

In the Number 15 Municipal Middle School in Peking I went into a classroom with the headmaster. Immediately the children stood up, grinned and clapped. It was the time for the daily fifteen minutes schools' news broadcast which all children in the Peking area must listen to. I stood at the back of the class and listened as the announcer spoke of the latest piece of American aggression in South Vietnam. Later we went through the current affairs room and saw the posters and essays which the students themselves had prepared. There was one section for America, another for Africa, a third for South East Asia, and so on. Each section was an exposé of American imperialism complete with photographs of race riots in the Southern States compiled from Chinese newspapers. We saw the people of Panama "rising up" in righteous



My hostess at the childrens' palace in Shanghai

indignation, a cartoon of President Johnson trying to gobble South Vietnam, and many similar themes.

But the biggest blow came from a sweet little 12 year old girl who had held my hand as she led me through one of the childrens' palaces in Shanghai. It had been a pleasant afternoon. I had seen the childrens' ballet lessons, heard the singing group, and the orchestra. I had joined in with the drama group. We saw the model aeroplane and ship building classes and a host of other activities. At the end of my visit, 150 children were lined up outside to wave goodbye to me. My little hostess had a farewell speech to make and as she started, it crossed my mind to reply to the crowd of children in Chinese. She started ... "Uncle, thank you for visiting our childrens' palace this afternoon. When you return to your country I hope you will give our best wishes to the children of your country, so that your children and ourselves can march together towards a bright future working together to oppose that greatest evil in the world -- American imperialism." I felt as though she had slapped my face. I could say nothing, only get into the car and drive away. On the way back to the hotel I protested to the interpreter, "This is going a bit too far. I have many American friends and what she said is simply not true." He replied, "We also have many American friends and you are making the mistake of equating the American people with their imperialist government. Have you anywhere in China seen or heard any criticism of the American people? It is only the imperialists we oppose, the children are taught to love the American people." I had to agree I had never seen anything against the people, but on the other hand I had not seen anything for them either, and I did not think children of seven or eight could differentiate between a people and their government. It is basically wrong, I told him, for any nation to give such a distorted view of the world to its children.

On another occasion I was shown around the Museum of the Revolution in Peking. We paused alongside the display of the Opium War which presented a most damning case against the "British Imperialists." As I stood there a group of school children came in and many glanced curiously in my direction as their teacher told them the story of the Opium War. I asked the guide, "What thoughts are in the minds of those children now, I am British, do they hate me? Do they think of me as an imperialist?" He laughed, "Does it look as though they hate you? No, the children love the people of all countries. The fact that you are willing to come to China to see for yourself, is taken as a friendly act and shows you are not an imperialist."

Reflecting afterwards about what I had seen I realized that the Chinese government has been pretty shrewd. If the rapprochement with the United States comes, this can be readily explained to the Chinese people as due to the American people who have prevailed over their imperialist rulers. The whole attitude to America can be changed overnight without any loss of face for the Chinese.

All of what I have commented on so far has been noted in varying degrees by other visitors. The one new impression which I returned with, and what to me marks one of the greatest achievements of the communist rule, is the extent to which science and the spirit of innovation has been brought to the people. Since I regard this as so important I will treat it separately in my next letter.

Yours sincerely,

C.H.G. Oldham

C.H.G. Oldham.

The photograph on the front page was taken from the Hangchow-Canton train. The characters on the building say, "MORE - QUICKER - BETTER - AND MORE ECONOMICAL" -- one of the ubiquitous slogans. The man is raking newly harvested rice to dry in the sun on a concrete slab.