

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

CHGO-45
Visits to Chinese Communes

27 Lugard Road,
The Peak,
Hong Kong.

January 18, 1965.

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

Dear Mr. Nolte,

This letter is based almost entirely on the information I received during visits to seven communes. What I was told on these half-day and one-day visits was very much the official line and almost every statement needs a qualification. However, rather than make these qualifications and run the risk of a book length article, I will stick to what I was actually told and saw. It should be realized that the resultant picture of the communes is a greatly simplified one and that in practise the situation is much more complicated. Also, any generalizations refer only to the seven communes which I visited and not to China as a whole.

A commune is the basic unit of society in rural China. When first organized during the "Great Leap Forward" of 1958 they caused much comment throughout the world, with Secretary of State Dulles leading the way with a speech in which he accused the Chinese government of imposing mass slavery on 650 million people. The structure of the commune has been considerably modified in the intervening six and a half years and my comments of course, relate to the communes in October and November of 1964. According to published figures there are now 74,000 communes in China, and making a very rough estimate, about 50 to 100 of these have been shown to foreigners. Although tourists are always modestly told that the commune they are visiting is not the best in the area, it is usually admitted that it is one of the best half-dozen. Therefore the picture of the commune which can be built up from the impressions of foreign visitors almost certainly relates to the best $\frac{1}{2}\%$, and should be regarded as what China is striving for, rather than what has been achieved throughout the country.

Apart from the Marco Polo Bridge Commune, which I saw with six other tourists, I visited each commune accompanied only by an interpreter. I was always met by the commune director and taken into the committee room for a long "brief introduction". About half of the commune committee rooms had photographs of Marx, Lenin, Engels, and Stalin on one side, and Mao Tse-tung, Liu Shao-chi, Chou En-lai, and Chu Teh on the other. Some of the more interesting of the many statistics given at the "introductions" are compiled in the accompanying table.

SOME COMMUNE STATISTICS

1 hectare = 2.47 acres
 1 mou = .066 hectare = .1647 acre

1 catty = .5 kg. = 1.1 lb.
 U.S. \$1 = ¥2.4

	(1) Marco Polo Bridge Commune, Peking	(2) October Commune Nanking	(3) Tang Wan Commune Shanghai
No. of Advanced Agri. Co-ops. from which commune formed	5	3	14
Area, in mou	34,400	10,855	26,800
No. of families	9,100	2,420	4,697
No. of inhabitants	41,000	10,554	20,170
No. of laborers	17,200	?	10,300
No. of Production Brigades	5	7	12
No. of Prodctn. Teams	146	89	128
Crops (Area under cultivation)	Vegetables	Rice, wheat, oil bearing crops	Grain, cotton, vegetables
Production, 1963	268million catties	?	?
Average yield, catties/mou 1949/50			Grain Cotton
1957	?	?	413 76
1963			556 166
			700 270
No. of pigs 1957 sold 1963	? 6,300	? 5,700	5,500 11,800
Fish ponds-catch/yr. or (area)	?	60,000 kilos	98,000 catties
No. of electric pumping stations	452	?	22 (43 pumps)
% of land irrigated by electric pumps	100%	?	98%
No. of tractors	8+23 hand tractors	None	7+3 hand tractors
% of land ploughed by tractor	?	-	55%
No. of trucks	42	4	?

(4) Chien Chiao Commune Hangchow			(5) Yan Buh Commune Canton		(6) Tiger Hill Commune Soochow		(7) Dragon Well Brigade, Hangchow	
22			47		?		?	
16,665			43,064sq.kilo-2,453 cultivated)		?		?	
4,403			15,592		?		132	
21,909			60,300		?		581	
?			30,200		?		?	
24			12		14		1	
283			220		152		?	
Vegetables, jute, medical herbs			Rice(2144 hectares) Vegetables(91 ") Fruit (54 ") Sugar cane(106")		Rice paddy(11,000 mou) Tea (830 ")		Tea (450 mou)	
?			?		?		?	
Veg.	Jute	Grain	Grain					
3426	245	382	?				40	
6057	361	573	?		?		114	
10544	507	913	1,169				262	
3,744			12,000		?		?	
8,185			33,000					
(838mou)			(75 hectares)		?		?	
28(112 pumps =943HP)			42(Total 1268kilowatts)		?		?	
87%			?		?		?	
None			10		?		?	
-			40%					
?			?		?		?	

COMMUNE STATISTICS (continued)

	(1) Marco Polo Bridge Commune, Peking	(2) October Commune Nanking	(3) Tang Wan Commune Shanghai
Hospitals & (clinics)	0 + (5)	1 + (4)	1 + (3)
No. of hospital beds	0	70	20?
Doctors & nurses, Western medicine + (Chinese medicine)	16 + (4)	22 + (5)	?
No. of Primary schools (% of children in school)	24 (100%)	9 (90%)	21 ?
No. of Middle schools	2	3(1 normal, 2 agricultural)	1 Jnr.
% of children who graduate to middle schools	?	70%	80%
Average amount of chemical fertilizer (catties/mou)	100	?	30-40 each harvest
Private plots	1/2 mou/2 people	7% cultivated land	7% cultivated area
Factories	?	Farm tool. Rice polishing. Cement. Glass. Fans.	Farm tool. Grain processing
Research institute	No	Yes	No
Experimental fields (mou)	3 (200)	Yes	At commune, brigade & team levels
Income 1949/50 1957 1963	Commune director ¥2/day	¥750/household	¥98/person ¥210/ " ¥330/ "
Broadcasting station	Yes	Yes	Yes
Miscellaneous	6,400 bicycles 2,100 greenhouses 60% of families have a radio		

(4) Chien Chiao Commune Hangchow	(5) Yan Buh Commune Canton	(6) Tiger Hill Commune Soochow	(7) Dragon Well Brigade, Hangchow
1 + (?)	2 + (12)	?	?
40	?	?	?
?	40 + (14) doctors 74 nurses	?	?
17(100%)	'57-18- 6800 pupils '63-47-12500	16	1
1	4	3	
?	40%	?	?
40/year(40% of all fertilizer is chemical)	?	?	?
?	6% of cultivated land	?	?
?	2 brick. 2 lime. 1 farm tool		
No	Yes	?	?
Yes	200 workers (600 mou) (130 mou for rice)	?	?
¥167/household			¥120/household
¥451/ "	¥138/person		¥585/ "
¥858/ "	¥298/ "	¥450/person	¥876/ "
Yes	?	?	?
	60% of households have electricity		



Commune Director (right) on the Tang Wan Commune

Most of the directors were surprisingly young men, and two could not have been much over 30 years of age. It was also remarkable that they should devote so much time to foreign tourists. For example, at the October Commune in Nanking, I spent from 9.00a.m. to 5 p.m. with the director, and on the succeeding two days two other tourists spent half a day each with the same man. The Chinese clearly attach great importance to correcting the "misconceptions" that foreigners are supposed to hold about communes. As one West German tourist remarked to the Marco Polo Bridge Commune Director, "The communes have faced and overcome a variety of natural calamities in the past few years, but you are facing a new problem which is going to be more difficult for you to conquer -- this is the time wasted showing foreign tourists around!"

First I will describe the organization of a typical commune as told in answer to my questions after the introductory talks. This is a synthesis, and for those who want to know more specifically at which commune I was given the various bits of information I have followed each section by a number in parenthesis. This number serves to identify the relevant communes as shown in the table.

Organizationally, all communes are divided into Production Brigades, which are further subdivided into Production Teams. The number of brigades to a commune and number of teams to a brigade varies considerably, but averaged 12 brigades and 15 teams respectively. Each team is made up of a number of households, and since the team is usually a village, the number of households also varies enormously depending upon the size of the previously established village. From 30 to 150 households to a team would be average figures.

Each unit in this triumvirate is run by a committee elected by commune members. The team and brigade committees are elected annually, and the commune committee biennially (4). Committee members can be re-elected. The method of election to the team committee is for the team to submit a slate of ten members to a higher committee (it was not clear to me whether this higher committee was the brigade committee or the Communist Party committee). The higher committee selects five of these on the basis of their political and work abilities. The whole team then votes "Yes" or "No" on these five (1).

Each year the State gives a suggested figure of production to the commune, usually based on the results of the previous year's harvest. The commune committee discusses this and in turn makes suggestions to each brigade committee, which in its own turn makes its suggested production figures to each team. The team committee decides whether it can meet these figures or exceed them, and then passes back up the line its own production estimates. The commune sends the revised figures back to the State. The State then considers the commune's suggestions and sets a fixed target. The various commune committees again meet and ultimately each production team receives a formal fixed production target. It is up to each team to decide how to fulfil its own target (3). It seems that the target amount, less the commune's needs, must be sold to the State at a fixed price. If the target is exceeded the surplus can either be kept by the team, sold to the State, or sold at a considerably higher price on the free market.

The team committee meets about every ten days to discuss short range objectives, work allocations, and disciplinary problems -- such as, who are the slackers, and why (1). It assigns points for each job and sets the norm for a day's work. The norm is equivalent to ten points. At the end of each day the work of each member is assessed. If he exceeds the norm he will get more than ten points, if he does not, he gets less. At the end of the year when the money from the harvests is divided, each worker receives a sum in proportion to the number of points accrued. Special dispensation is made for widows and those households with few laborers due to illness or other authentic reasons (1:2:3).

The production team is also responsible for the marketing of its own products. Out of the proceeds it must pay taxes to the State and to the commune. A typical team's balance sheet for 1963 was as follows (4):

Capital & recurrent expenses				
(tools, seeds, fertilizer, etc.) ...	21%	of	total	income
Agricultural tax paid to the State ...	7%	"	"	"
Public funds paid to the commune ...	7%	"	"	"
Distributed between members of the team	65%	"	"	"

The brigade committee organizes activities which pertain to the welfare of the brigade, such as shopping centers, clinics, primary schools, and entertainment (film shows), and sometimes factories and broadcasting stations. The commune committee has the responsibility for commune-wide activities which might include

a tractor station, some factories, middle schools, hospitals, research institutes, and a broadcasting station. The commune committee also has responsibility for planning large scale irrigation and flood control measures. It is the ability to plan and carry out these large scale water conservancy measures which seems to be the main advantage of the communes. I was told in just about every one I visited that without these measures the commune would have been in dire straits during the three years of natural calamities experienced by China from 1959 to 1961. As it was, some of them even managed to increase yields despite the conditions.

It is evident that the communes have changed a great deal from the early days when many experiments in communal living were tried. Now, all families live and eat together in their homes, frequently with three generations in each house. I saw only one canteen (2) and this was run more as a restaurant for visitors from Nanking who came out to ramble in the countryside and visit the Temple of a Thousand Buddhas. Even the students and others who come from the towns for "productive labor" eat and sleep with the peasants in their homes. The basic accounting unit is usually the village, now called the production team, and payment to individual peasants is made following the maxim, "To each according to his work". Each worker has his own private plot where he can grow whatever he pleases. These plots collectively averaged from 5% to 7% of total cultivated land and at Tang Wan Commune I was told that last year each household had been able to supplement its income by an average of ¥80 from the yield of its private plots.



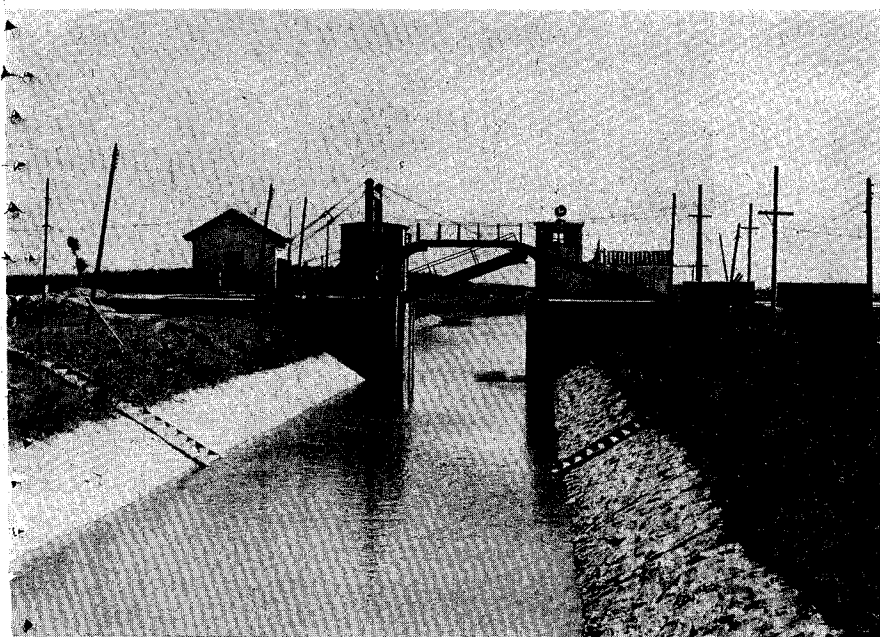
Private plots along a river bank at the Tang Wan Commune.
The modern looking building in the center is a school.

COMMUNE WATER CONSERVANCY PROJECTS

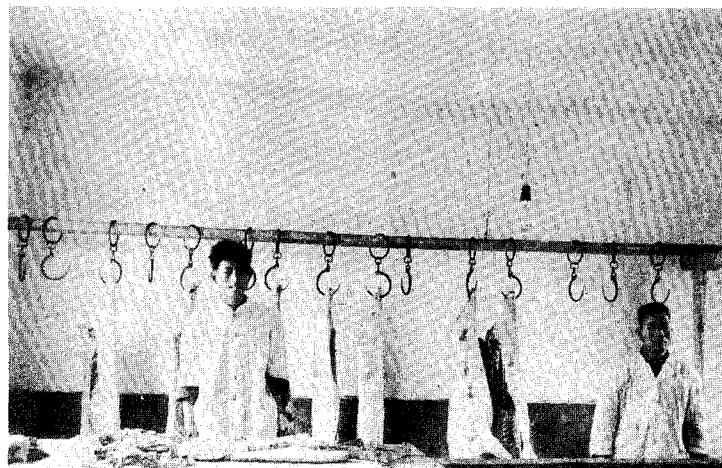
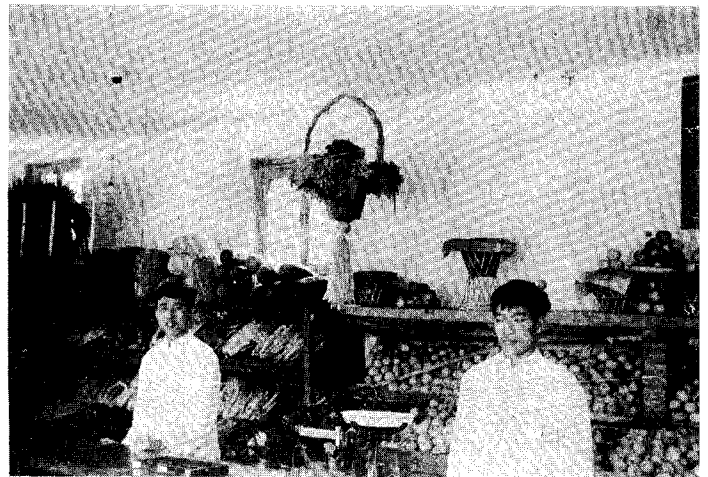
Right: Irrigation canal at the Yan Buh Commune. Building on the right is part of the Commune Research Institute



Left: An electric powered navigation lock gate on the Yan Buh Commune. This is part of a 22 lock dam across the river. The gates of these 22 locks (not shown in photo) can be raised and lowered by means of an ingenious device whereby each gate is counter-balanced by a large tank. To raise the gates the tanks are merely filled with water. To lower the gates, the tanks are emptied. Twenty-eight thousand people worked on the project which took six months to complete and cost ¥86,000.



Shops at Brigade Headquarters,
Marco Polo Bridge Commune,
Peking



After the introduction and question period I was shown a sample of the commune's facilities and activities. These usually included: experimental plots; research institutes; schools; hospitals and clinics; factories; and peasant's housing.

Experimental plots and research institutes:

All the communes had their own experimental fields, and two had their own research institute. At the Tang Wan Commune I was told that research was carried out at all three administrative levels, commune, brigade, and team. I found it difficult to find out how much advice on research was received from government experts or specialists from the Agricultural Academy. There was clearly some contact because at the Nanking October Commune there were displays of plant and insect diseases and pests which had been prepared by the Agricultural Academy. But I got the impression that for the most part research was an internal affair of the commune, with only little outside assistance. For example, at the Yan Buh Commune there were only two university trained scientists among a staff of 200 working in the research institute and experimental fields.

In most communes a sincere effort was being made to popularize science and to increase the technical knowledge of the peasants. They now seem to understand that by experimenting and with the proper application of scientific methods they can improve production. The Hangchow Commune had an "Association for Popularizing Science" which decided what should be popularized, and then ran courses and gave lectures on the chosen topics. This same commune was part of a larger grouping of five communes which were banded together under a district committee. This larger grouping was equivalent to a county, and had its own Agricultural Bureau which sent experts to the commune to help plan experiments.

Factories

In most communes I was shown a few factories. They were mostly fairly crude and primitive and I would guess that productivity

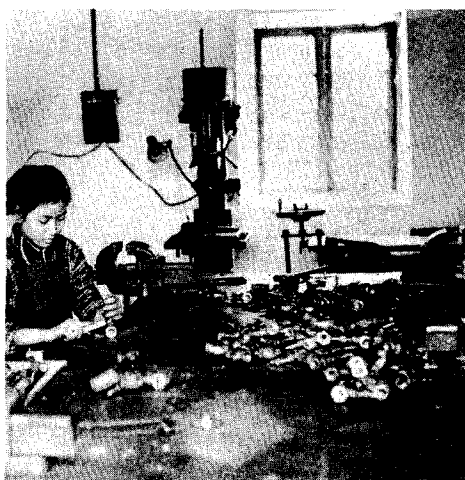
Agricultural tool
factory, October
Commune.
Left to right:
Factory manager,
commune director,
and interpreter.
The wall slogan
says: "Long live
the General Line,
Long live the
Great Leap Forward
Long live the
Peoples' Communes



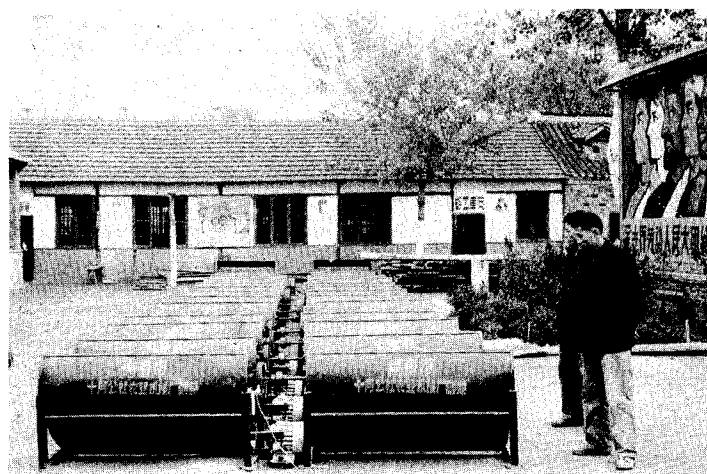


FACTORIES AT THE
OCTOBER COMMUNE

Left and below:
Agricultural
implements factory

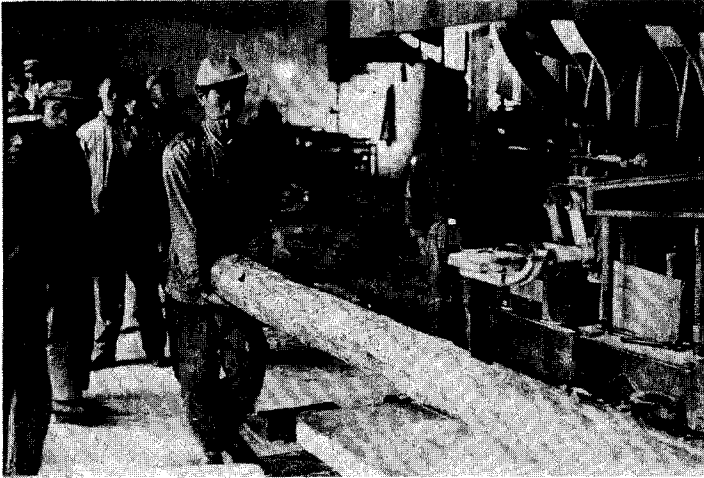


Above: Making
valves for irrigation
pipes



Right:
Glass bottle factory





Demonstration of the band-saw in the carpenter's shop, Tang Wan Commune

was low. Their chief justification seemed to be to provide employment in off season times, and to make the commune as self-sufficient as possible.

Schools

All the communes claimed to have more than 90% of children of primary school age at school. Some even claimed a 100% record. I visited only one primary school and that was in



A Tang Wan Commune Primary School

the Shanghai Commune. This school had 600 pupils and last year 85% of the graduating class went on to middle school. (The average for the whole Commune was 80% of children from primary school graduating to middle school).

The October Commune Middle School had both junior and senior divisions with more than 900 students and 50 teachers. My visit took place on a Sunday and there were no classes, however,

the unfortunate headmaster and several teachers were rounded up after I expressed a desire to see the school. It was a couple of days after the Chinese atomic bomb explosion and the official communique announcing the explosion had been written on the news blackboard.



The headmaster (left) and commune director in the reading room of the October Commune Middle School. Large wall poster in center says: "Let the proletariat of the world unite with the oppressed peoples and races" Poster on left says, "Study Mao Tse-tung's works and go from victory to victory".

The reading room contained a good supply of Chinese language magazines, many of them, such as Chemical World, were on applied science subjects. All students are required to learn a foreign language and can choose between English and Russian. The library contained 30,000 volumes, but I suspect these included textbooks. The librarian proudly displayed her collection of English language books, but with one exception they were all translations of Chinese works. The exception was a book of poems by Rewi Alley, the New Zealander who has been a long-time resident in Peking. The chemistry laboratory looked in a pretty sorry state, but the physics laboratory was well equipped with a variety of demonstration models, vacuum pumps, and electronic apparatus. The biology store room also had a good collection of models -- a skeleton, hearts, and other human and animal organs.

The Commune near Hangchow had a junior middle school (for 12 to 15 year olds) but the senior middle school was run by the State. The chemistry laboratory in the commune school was better than in the Nanking commune school, and had a good supply of chemicals. There were also several wall charts, including one of the periodic table. In the physics laboratory I noticed, among other things, an

astronomical telescope, a Whimshurst machine, and an induction coil. There were also many models which showed the operation of internal combustion engines, pumps, steam engines, and large working models of ammeters and voltmeters. For individual student experiments there was a supply of balances, simple electrical apparatus, and calorimeters for heat experiments.

School fees must be paid, but I did not inquire how much they were. Since returning to Hong Kong I have read that in one commune near Canton the fees are ¥30 a year for middle school students, and ¥7 a year for primary school students.

Medical Facilities

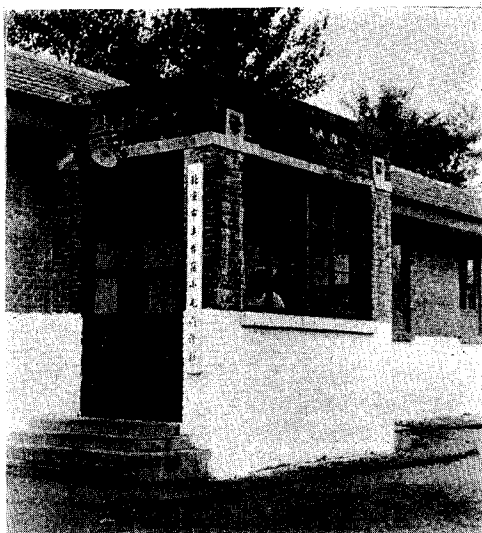
China still makes considerable use of her traditional Chinese doctors -- the acupuncture experts and herbalists -- and each commune hospital and clinic had several on its staff. The ratio of staff trained in Western medicine to those trained in Chinese medicine in all the hospitals and clinics was about 4:1. I was told that older people still prefer Chinese medicine, although much depends upon the nature of their illness. However, on the only occasion I saw out-patients waiting for treatment (Yan Buh Commune) those waiting for Chinese medicine outnumbered those waiting for Western medicine by about 3:1.

At the Marco Polo Bridge Commune each brigade had its own clinic. The one I visited had a staff of 20 doctors and nurses and had five rooms. One was for Chinese medicine, others were for diagnosis and treatment with Western medicine, a fourth was a dispensary for drugs and medicines (all of which were made in China), and the fifth was a maternity room with two delivery tables.

The October Commune near Nanking had one hospital with 70 beds and four health stations (presumably these were clinics). I was taken to see the hospital where I was told that up to 700 out-patients were treated each week, and that the common cold and hepatitis were the most common ailments.

The consulting rooms and operating theater were not impressive. They were small and did not appear particularly clean. The only apparatus I saw in the theater was an anaesthetizing machine. Most of the beds in the wards were occupied and the patients certainly looked very ill! I was taken aback when they all tried to applaud as I walked into the ward, and so I hastened to say in Chinese that I hoped they would all get well quickly. I enquired about maternity cases and was told that most babies are born in the homes. Accident cases go to the hospital in Nanking. This commune hospital was well below Western standards, but a short while ago there had been no medical facilities of any kind in the area.

The Tang Wan Commune had a small hospital and three clinics. In addition, each team had a person trained in "health protection". I visited the hospital which was much better than the one in the October Commune. There appeared to be about 20 beds. The hospital was converted from an old traditional style house arranged around a very pleasant courtyard with a garden and flowers. There was the usual collection of consulting and treatment rooms, a dispensary, a



Above:
Marco Polo Bridge Commune.
A clinic at a brigade headquarters



Above: A doctor of
traditional Chinese medicine
at the October Commune



Above: Doctor and anaesthetizing
machine in the operating theater
in October Commune Hospital



Right:
The Tang Wan Commune Hospital

room for Chinese medicine, and a maternity room. In this commune, about half the babies were born in the hospital and the rest at home. At each commune I asked about the population increase over the past few years but only in this commune did I get a statistical answer. The population there had increased by 2% per year. I was also told that birth control advice was given by the maternity department. I was introduced to a staff of about nine doctors and nurses, but did not see any patients.

The Hangchow Commune had a 40 bed hospital and like the Tang Wan Commune each production team had one person trained in health protection. In the old days Schistosomiasis had been a major problem but now it has been wiped out "in the main". I was introduced to the vice-director of the hospital, an attractive young lady wearing slacks and white coat. She showed me the x-ray room, dispensary, and operating theater. The latter had two operating tables, good lighting arrangements, cabinets of instruments, etc., and all were very clean. I was told that they can operate on patients needing treatment for disorders below the waist (e.g. appendicitis) but patients are sent to the Hangchow hospital for operations on the upper part of the body.

The Yan Buh Commune had two hospitals and in addition each brigade had its own clinic. I paid a brief visit to one of the hospitals. Most of the outpatients were waiting in the Chinese medicine section, but the Western medicine section was clean and the dispensary was well stocked with drugs and medicines. Again I was told that all the latter had been made in China.

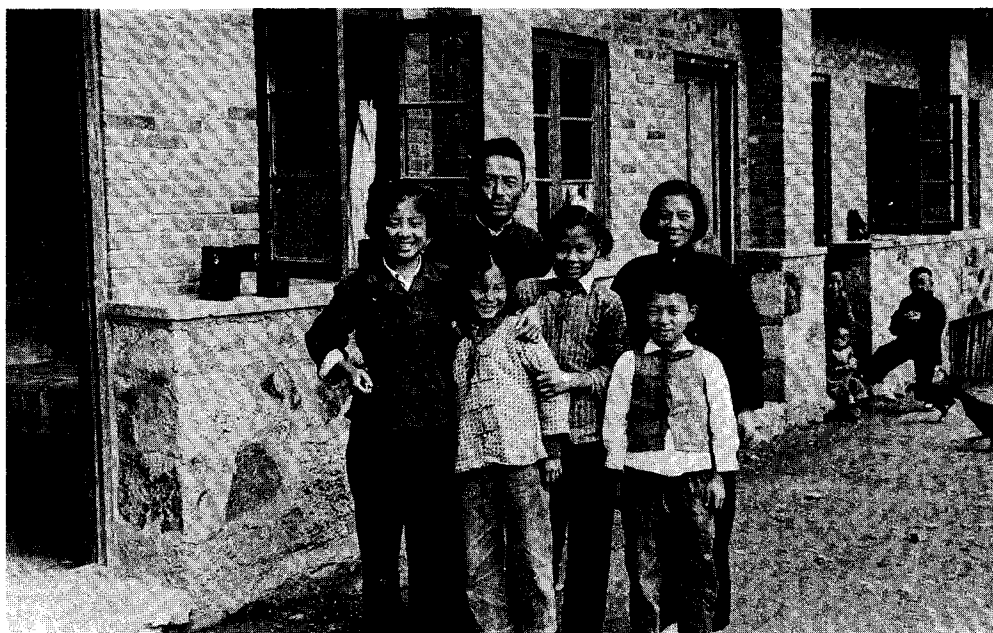
I neglected to inquire about the cost of medical treatment in the communes, but since returning to Hong Kong I have discovered that although most factory workers and professional people receive free medical treatment in China the same is not true for peasants. For example, a 34 year old woman, who lives in the same commune that our amah originally came from, near Canton, recently came to Hong Kong for kidney stone operations because it is so much cheaper in a Hong Kong Government hospital. It would have cost her the equivalent of H.K.\$1,000 (U.S.\$200) in China, and her total expenses in Hong Kong were only H.K.\$40. She has been convalescing at our house before returning to her family of four young children in China next month.

Peasant Housing

Of all the things shown to a tourist in a commune, the housing conditions are most difficult to assess. I was almost always shown some homes and from talking to other tourists who visited the same commune at other times I gathered we were all shown the same ones. It is extremely difficult to determine how typical these were and adjectives such as good and poor are meaningless.

In many of the homes an old grandmother was looking after grandchildren while the mother worked. They were always delighted to be the center of attention and to tell stories of hardship under the cruel landlords in "Pre-Liberation" days, and of happiness and joy now. Some of the houses, such as those I saw in Peking where the climate is quite severe, were well built. The usual practise,

PEASANTS' HOUSING



October Commune,
Nanking



Above: Tiger Hill Commune, Soochow



Left: Marco Polo Bridge Commune, Peking.
(Note old lady's bound feet)

especially in Peking, was for two or three generations to live in the same house, with up to fifteen inhabitants and as many as eight sleeping in a single enormous bed. One house I visited at the Peking Commune had five workers in the family and last year each earned ¥600 -- thus netting ¥3,000 for the family (this is about four times the average income of people in the other communes I visited). They were building a new house nearby which was costing about ¥4,000. Another house I priced in the Nanking Commune had cost ¥1,500, and one in Hangchow cost ¥2,000. The situation regarding this latter household was probably more typical than that of the Peking household. There were eight members of the family, four of whom were working. The house had a concrete floor, a small living space and two bedrooms, with three beds altogether, one of which was an impressive four-poster. Last year, after paying all expenses, the family had an excess of ¥340, most of which went to pay back a State loan obtained to buy the house. The loan was for 15 years at an interest rate of 0.3% per year, but the family hoped to pay it off sooner. The family had two bicycles and outside the house was the private plot, used for growing vegetables.

Ex-landlords

I usually asked the commune directors what had happened to the ex-landlords. The replies were roughly the same at each commune. There are several categories of landlords. In the top category are those who have been completely remoulded and are now fully fledged members of the commune. At the bottom there are those who have not been remoulded, who are deprived of any commune rights, and are made to work under the supervision of the peasants. There are several groups in between, and the ex-landlords and rich peasants can be promoted or demoted from one group to another.

o o o

These visits to communes raised more questions than they answered. It was tantalising to be so close to one of the most fascinating social experiments ever carried out by man, without being able to really penetrate the surface and find out what goes on beneath it. For example, I learned nothing at the communes of the part played by the Communist Party committees or the Party Secretaries. Yet all the operas, dances, and films I saw in China clearly indicated that the Party Secretary was one of the most important men in any commune.

The peasants are obviously better off than they were before (see income figures in the table). The flood control measures and irrigation canals are impressive. There is a spirit of innovation and a very striking determination to improve. "Rely on our own efforts" was perhaps the most frequently quoted slogan that I heard and saw.

But the mere fact that so many organizational changes have taken place in the communes is indicative of dissatisfactions.

Those I visited varied considerably and it seems fairly certain that the organization of the communes is still in a state of flux. Certainly they are a long way from being "communist societies". I once suggested that it was very non-communistic for each production team to be allowed to keep its own profits, since some teams would work on fertile land and get good crops while others may work, perhaps harder, on infertile land and get poor crops. The commune director replied, "But if we shared equally between all members of the commune there would be no incentive for those in the fertile areas." Which perhaps goes to show that there is still a long way to go before China reaches her ideal of a truly communist society.

Yours sincerely,

C.H.G. Oldham

C.H.G. Oldham.

Received New York January 22, 1965