

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CHGO-49  
Ten thousand miles to London, by train  
I: China Revisited

2 Avenue des Tilleuls,  
Croissy-sur-Seine,  
(S. & O.), France.

July 18, 1965.

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

Dear Mr. Nolte,

On the wall of my study in Hong Kong there used to hang a map of Asia. One feature on the map which frequently drew my attention was a thin black line which started in Hong Kong, and after winding a tortuous path through China, Mongolia, the Soviet Union, and several European countries, it ended in London. It conveyed the information that it was technically possible to go from Hong Kong to London by train.

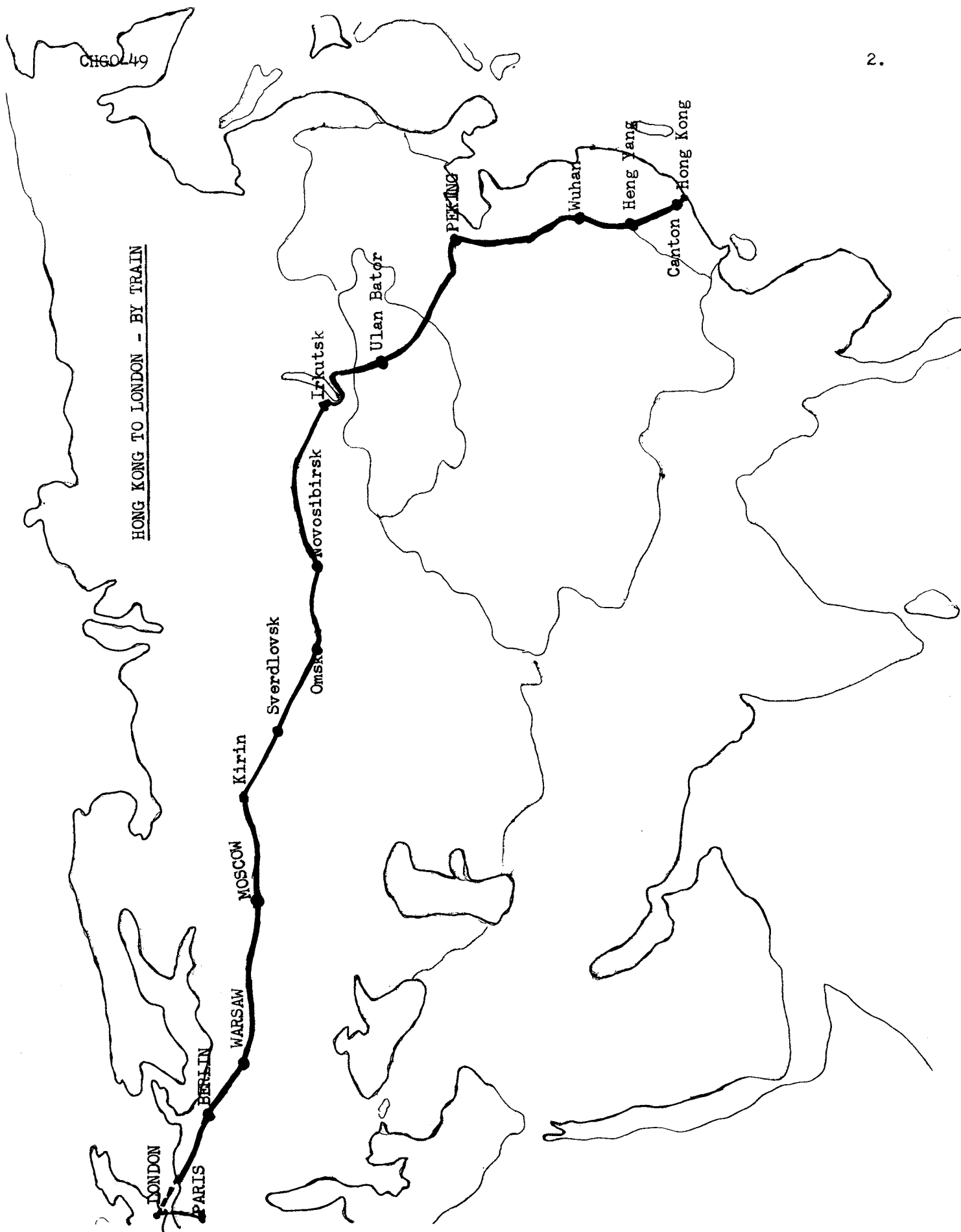
Technically possible, yes, but until early this year, difficult to arrange. It required simultaneous visas from three unpredictable countries: China, Mongolia, and the Soviet Union, and whereas any two might grant them, it was unusual for all three to do so at the same time. However with China's new policy to encourage tourism it seemed worth a try to return from Hong Kong by train. In fact -- we got our Chinese visas within a month, Intourist approval for travel in Russia within two months, but were informed Mongolian visas could only be arranged once we were in Peking. It was sufficient encouragement to attempt the journey. One of the main reasons, it must be admitted, was the hope that a second visit to Peking might be more productive in making contact with the Academy Sinica than my first visit. And any move which opened channels of communication with Chinese scientists seemed worthwhile.

It was arranged that we would spend two days in Wuhan, the big industrial complex on the Yangtse, and a week in Peking, before going on by train across Inner Mongolia, the Gobi Desert, and Mongolia. We would break the journey for two more days at Irkutsk, near Lake Baikal in Eastern Siberia, and then cross Siberia to Moscow. A further break of a few days in Moscow and then the final leg across Poland, East and West Germany, to the Hook of Holland and thence to London. The longest stretch would be from Irkutsk to Moscow, a time of four nights and three days on the train.

Eight twenty-five on the morning of Sunday, April 25th was departure time, and after final farewells to a heartwarming crowd of friends on the Kowloon railway station, the six Oldhams began the long journey west.

The first set-back came sooner than we had expected. On arrival in Canton we were told that we could not continue by train. The Luxingshe (China International Travel Service) representative said that arrangements had been made for us to travel by air the following day to Hangchow, and that we were to spend the night in Canton. I objected. He must have the wrong group. We had arranged

HONG KONG TO LONDON - BY TRAIN



to travel by train to Wuhan -- that night. No. Peking had informed them the day before that we were to fly to Hangchow.

It seemed likely that the reason for the Chinese insistence on our flying was military. If there were troop movements or military equipment going south towards Vietnam, then it would have to pass along the railway which joins the line from Canton at Heng Yang. At the same time we felt we had a strong case. Our rail tickets had been paid for, and our visas validated for Wuhan. We decided to stand firm. First, because to have had to fly the first leg of the journey would have been a great disappointment, but also because I wanted to see how the Chinese authorities would react to a firm stand.

The arguments, repeated patiently but firmly over and over again, went like this: The Canton Luxingshe representative -- We received our instructions from Peking, and made the air reservations. Today's train is fully booked, tomorrow's train is also fully booked, in fact we don't know when there will be room. May I suggest you come to the hotel and we can discuss the problem there.

Oldhams: We made reservations for the train two months ago. I have already visited Hangchow and we refuse in any event to fly. We intend to stay on the railway station in Canton until the matter is settled, because once in the hotel you will undoubtedly charge at the expensive standard rate of U.S. \$120 per day for our family of six. We are willing to pay this for our time in Wuhan and Peking, but not for either Canton or Hangchow.

It was apparent from the outset that we would not be able to catch the train that evening, and after several telephone calls to his office it was equally apparent that the Canton office of Luxingshe had no authority to make a new decision. After three hours of discussions the time came for the departure of the train. Just before it left I counted the number of empty berths -- there were twenty-two.

I then suggested to the representative that there was something inconsistent with his story and that perhaps his office should telephone Peking and seek a clarification. If there was some good reason why the Chinese Government did not want us to travel by train or see Wuhan then we would accept their change of plans. But if it was a bureaucratic error we intended to stay on the station until it was righted. Whereupon we sat down again, Brenda began to knit, and the children played cheerfully. The unfortunate representative was quite distraught. "I have never met tourists like you before," he said. "And we have never had a government travel service go back on its arrangements like this before," we replied.

Finally, after  $4\frac{1}{2}$  hours, he went off again and came back with the news that his office was telephoning Peking for instructions. At this point we agreed to go to the hotel, and an hour later he reappeared to say we could go by train the next day. "It was out of the goodness of their hearts," he said, "that Peking had arranged for you to fly to see a famous beauty spot rather than go by train to an industrial city."

Later, in Peking, we discovered that all tourists had been obliged to fly from Canton and it was reported in the Western press that a few days later the line had been completely closed to civilian traffic. Without reading too much into the incident, I believe it illustrates several features which are fairly typical of Communist Chinese behaviour. First of all there was the complete lack of ability to make a decision at a local level. Secondly the local junior official was

perfectly willing to invent excuses, and in fact to tell lies. The train was not full as he claimed, either on the day we arrived in Canton, or on the following day when six berths were allocated to us. Finally it illustrates their unwillingness to admit to an error, or as was almost certainly the case, to give a reasonably acceptable explanation for their change of arrangements.

The train journey to Wuhan took 24 hours. Chinese passenger coaches were very similar to the Russian ones we later travelled in across Siberia. The individual compartments are quite spacious, with four berths, a small table, lamp, and potted plant. For the family we had one compartment and shared another with two Chinese. Men and women are expected to share the same compartments.

The food on the Chinese trains was always excellent, although we were asked to wait until the main rush was over so that we could be served promptly. The time passed quickly and pleasantly. The children enjoyed the trains immensely. In China and Mongolia there were always things of interest to see from the window and we had brought plenty of things with which to occupy ourselves, but our own great stock of books remained unread while we organised the children's activities.

After crossing the mighty Yangtse river by the bridge built by the Communists in 1954, we arrived in Hankow, one of the three cities which make up Wuhan. Our reception there followed the pattern made familiar during my trip the previous year. Shortly after arrival a senior official of the local branch of Luxingshe visits the hotel room to arrange the itinerary. One tries politely to refuse the usual tourist sights which are offered, and to replace these with visits to places of greater personal interest. In Wuhan we hit a happy compromise. A visit to the Iron and Steel Corporation by the entire family, a visit to the University by myself, and one to a school by Brenda and the children -- in return for which we agreed to be shown the East Lake and to spend an afternoon "seeing" the Yangtse Bridge.

At the iron and steel corporation we were shown the whole exciting process: the blast furnaces (there are two in operation and a third nearly ready for operation); the open hearth furnaces (there were six in operation when we were there), and the steel rolling process. We were told there was another rolling mill in preparation and plans had been made for another for shaped steel. It was my first visit to any iron and steel plant, and so I have no knowledge on which to form the basis for a comparison. This plant dated from 1957 and much of the equipment we saw was clearly Russian in origin, although the Chinese claimed only 10% was from the Soviet Union. We were shown a central control room where furnace characteristics were automatically recorded. It was claimed that 2.8 million tons of steel a year are processed, but this seems to be a high figure and more probably indicates capacity, rather than actual figures for last year. Coal is brought from Hubei and Hunan Provinces, but the iron ore and refractory materials are found close by (40 kilometers away). There are 30,000 workers and 120 workshops in operation.

The visit to Wuhan Comprehensive University was similar to my visits to other universities six months previously. I could add another row of statistics to the table of Chinese universities, but the information on policies was the same as before. Following the usual pattern, the work done in the physics and chemistry laboratories was of a fairly high standard, whereas biology seemed relatively neglected.

Brenda and the children's visit to the kindergarten provided an opportunity for the Chinese children to put on a dance display which they had been practising

as a part of the May Day celebrations. One dance theme -- the shooting down of American planes by North Vietnamese patriots.

Another 24 hours and we were in Peking on the eve of May Day. There was the usual discussion with China Travel representatives. The usual efforts to choose one's own itinerary, which in this case included a meeting with the Academy Sinica scientists and a visit to their Geophysical Research Institute. I gave a reprint of my paper published in Science (the journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Science) which described my earlier visit and requested that this be passed on to the Academy. Then, since the following day was May Day, there was nothing for it but to join the crowds and wait for developments.

Crowds there certainly were. We woke about 6 a.m. to hear groups already marching with their flags to their appointed sites of revelry. As foreign guests we had tickets for all the parks where festivities took place. The May Day practise is not to have a big parade, this only occurs on October 1st, but instead all the parks are filled with colourful side-shows and dancers. Only people with tickets can get into the parks, and tickets are given to those workers and students who have merited them. In Coal Hill Childrens' Park where we spent most of the morning it seemed that groups were allocated special locations and only a relative few were able to wander around from group to group. This is noted not in any sense of criticism, it would have clearly been impossible to have allowed all and sundry into the parks, but to illustrate the incredible feat of organisation which goes into what I had once thought were spontaneous celebrations. These activities continued all morning.

Our four children (aged 12, 9, 9, and 6) had a great time. Whenever we appeared at any side show the crowds parted and our children were ushered to the front to have a go at "pinning the tail on the donkey", or to throw a ball at an effigy of President Johnson, and such-like diversions. Never before had they been the center of such attention. We would walk through lines of applauding Chinese and applaud in return. Janice joined in some of the dances. It was good fun, and both they and the Chinese children, and the members of the Peoples' Liberation Army who were also joining in the games, thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

In the evening there were the fireworks. Again what was impressive was the organisation. One million people in Tien An Men Square and adjoining streets, and all on their appointed spot. (The square is divided and subdivided into numbered squares). As foreign visitors we had tickets for the reviewing stand and watched two of the three displays, each twenty minutes in length, and without doubt the most impressive fireworks we had seen.

The rest of our time in Peking was occupied with visits to the usual tourist sights. We climbed up the Great Wall along with a vast holiday multitude, and the children scrambled, jumped and ran around Imperial palaces, Ming Tombs, and the Great Hall of the People, with too much energy and too little decorum. They rowed themselves around the lake at the Summer Palace, to the concern of our guides who couldn't swim, and were thrilled by the panda bear cub. David, our 12 year-old, even managed to fall down a flight of stairs and ended up in hospital with a suspected fractured leg. (It was only sprained!).

But I was finally granted a small measure of success. After four years of trying to make contact with Chinese geophysicists I was invited to visit the Geophysical Research Institute of the Academy Sinica, and the Geological Institute.

I will report on these visits in my next letter, but I must admit that this achievement gave me considerable satisfaction.

It is difficult to make comparisons between this visit and the one six months earlier. Making the visit with the family made personal and individual contact and conversations with the Chinese even more difficult. I was more conscious this time of the feeling of being inside a glass capsule and not making real contact with the world I passed through. It was also very trying for the children to have to sit through some of the interminable "introductions" which at one commune went on for  $1\frac{1}{2}$  hours. There were more "Support Vietnam" posters, and plenty of "anti-American Imperialism" displays. But the atmosphere and propaganda were not those of war hysteria. The objectives seemed to be to ridicule the American efforts in Vietnam and to suggest the inevitability that "right will win".

I got into fewer political debates than last time, although I couldn't resist the temptation to argue once or twice. It was the time of the controversy over the South Vietnamese' use of "poisonous" gas. One of the Chinese guides mentioned the subject and I suggested that he admit that it was only tear and sickness gas, and not really poisonous gas that had been used. He objected and said he could show me photographs of people killed by the gas. I commented on the ease of faking photographs and cynically added that I only believed what I saw with my own eyes. It was no accident I'm sure, that the following day we were taken to see an exhibition of American unmanned spy planes shot down by the Chinese. The queue of Chinese stretched for at least a mile, but as honoured guests we were taken to the front of the line! The photographs speak for themselves.

There were plenty of tourists in Peking, but very few in Wuhan, and I suspect the Vietnam situation is having its influence on the tourist trade to China. In fact our Wuhan interpreter somewhat wryly remarked, "Many tourists are afraid to come to China. They are afraid they will have their brains washed, and the tense situation in Vietnam is deterring them."

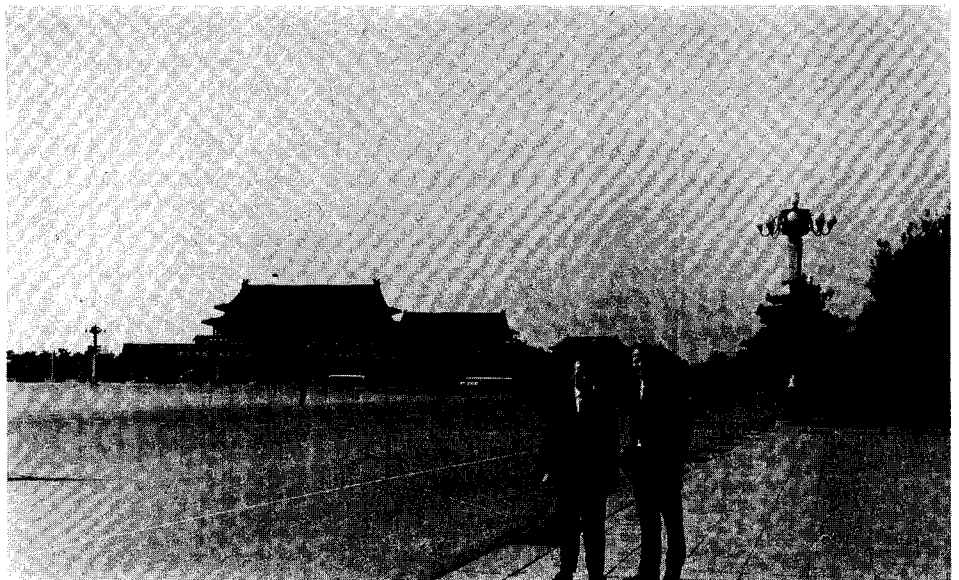
Yours sincerely,

*C.H.G. Oldham*

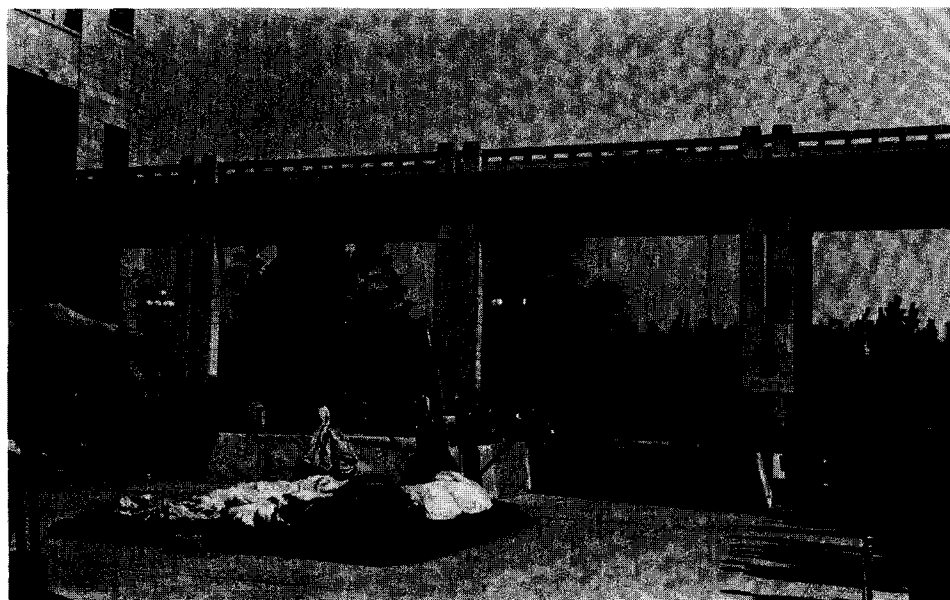
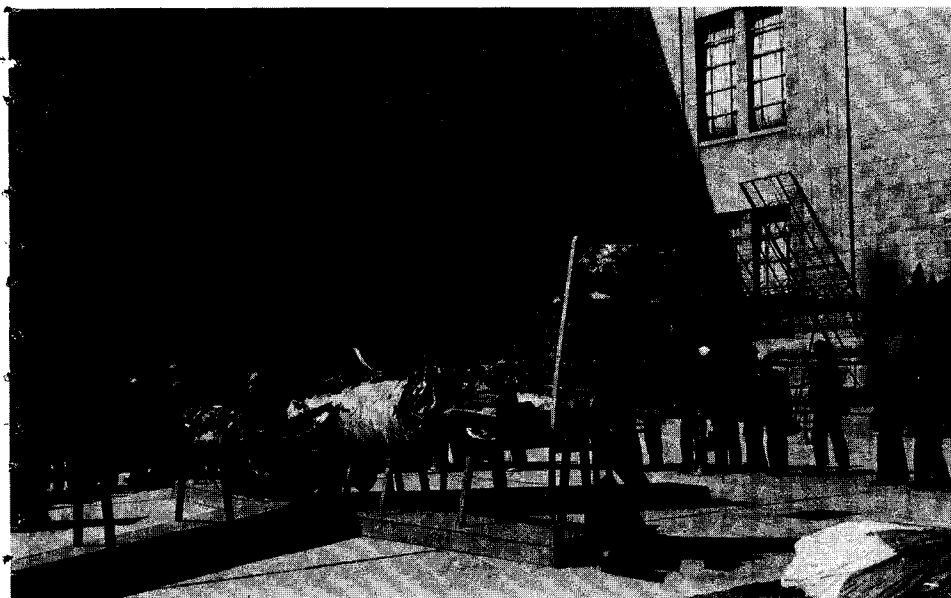
C.H.G. Oldham.

"Our men in Peking"  
ICWA Fellows,  
Anthony Dicks and CHGO.

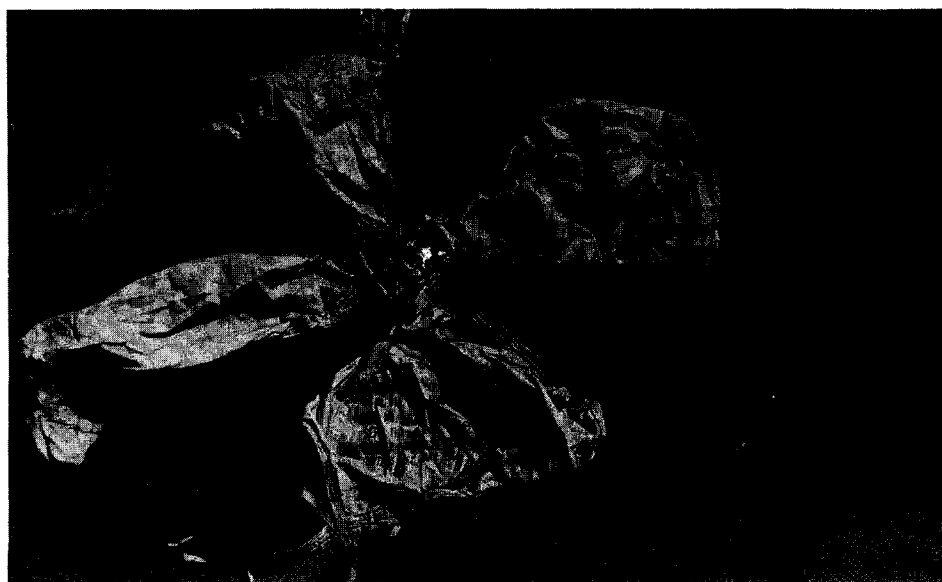
Received in New York  
July 21, 1965.



American unmanned  
"spy planes" shot down over  
China and on display at the  
Military Museum in Peking



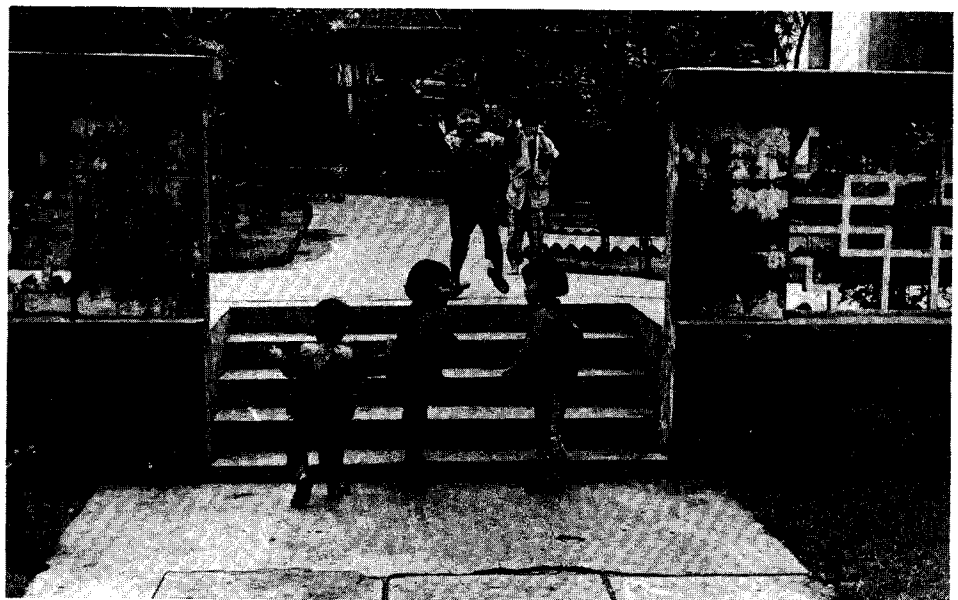
A part of the para-  
chute carefully  
arranged to display  
the label which shows  
it was made by the  
Pioneer Parachute  
Co. Inc., May 1964.



HONG KONG TO PEKING  
Photographic Supplement

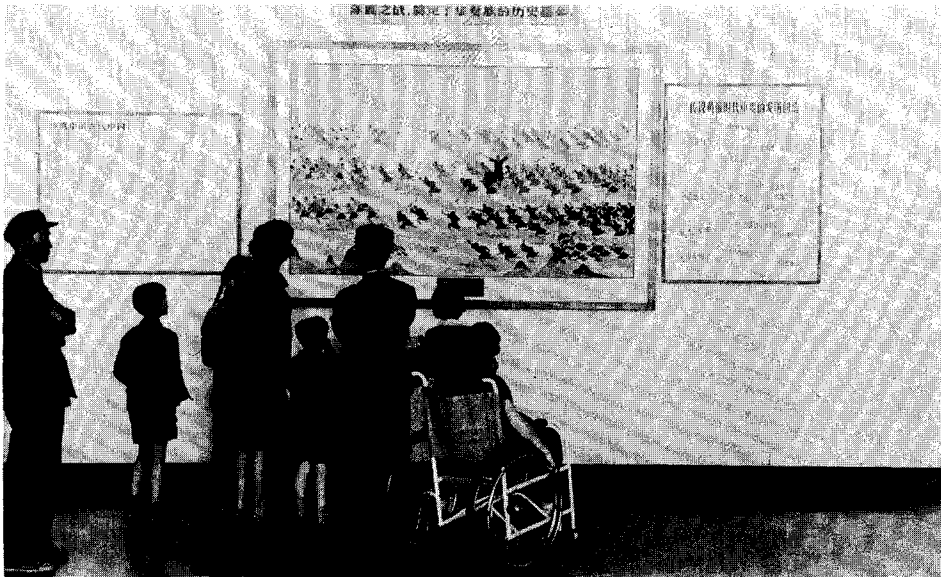


We're off!



Young children in Canton





The Museum of Chinese History, Peking  
(after David sprained his ankle; the chair was provided by the Museum)



The Great Wall  
May 2, 1965.

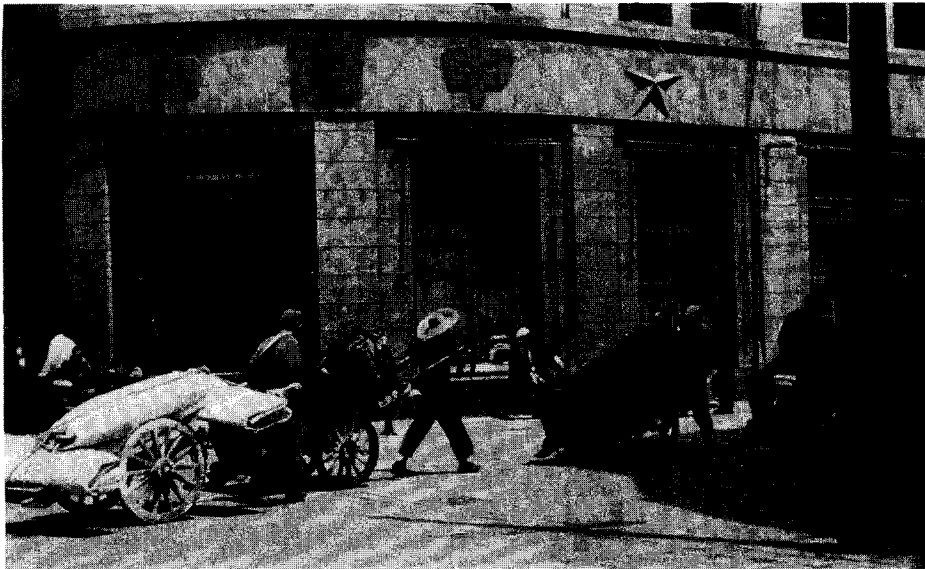
WUHAN UNIVERSITY

Top left: General view.  
Central building is library.

Center left: A chemistry  
laboratory.

Bottom: Reading rooms in  
the library.





Manpower is still  
widely used in China

WUHAN

Left: in front of a  
department store

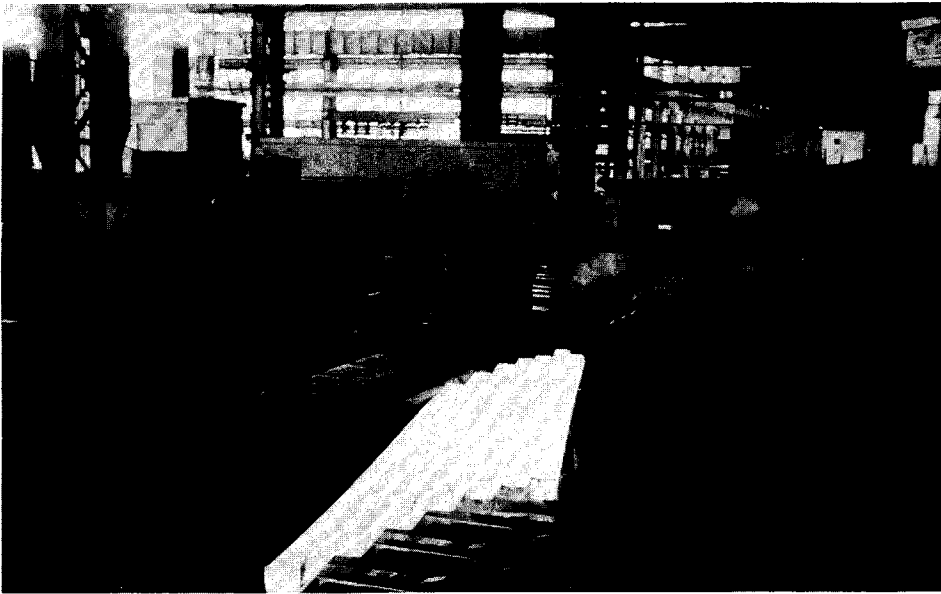
Below: At the back of  
the dike parallel to the  
Yangtse River



On the waterfront. Wuhan

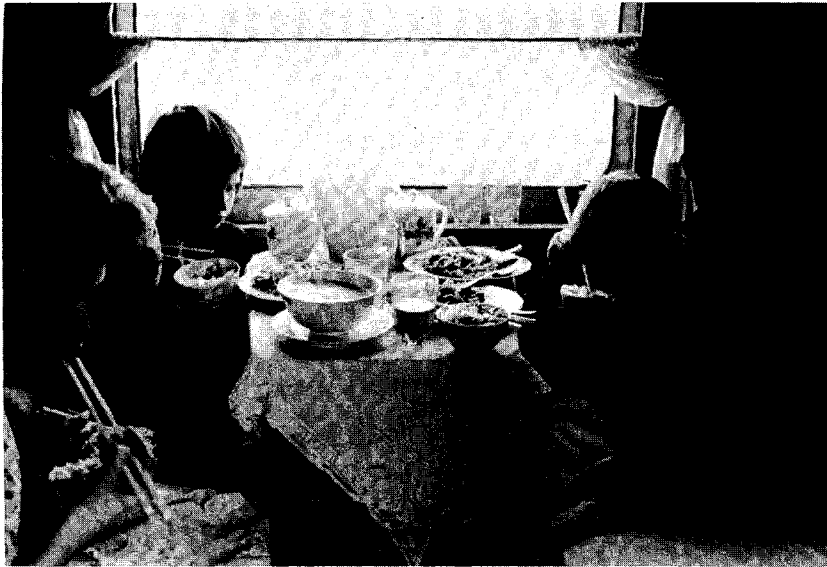
WUHAN

White hot bars of steel  
at the Wuhan Steel Rolling  
Mill



Kindergarten children  
at a Wuhan school  
shoot down American  
planes in the May  
Day performance

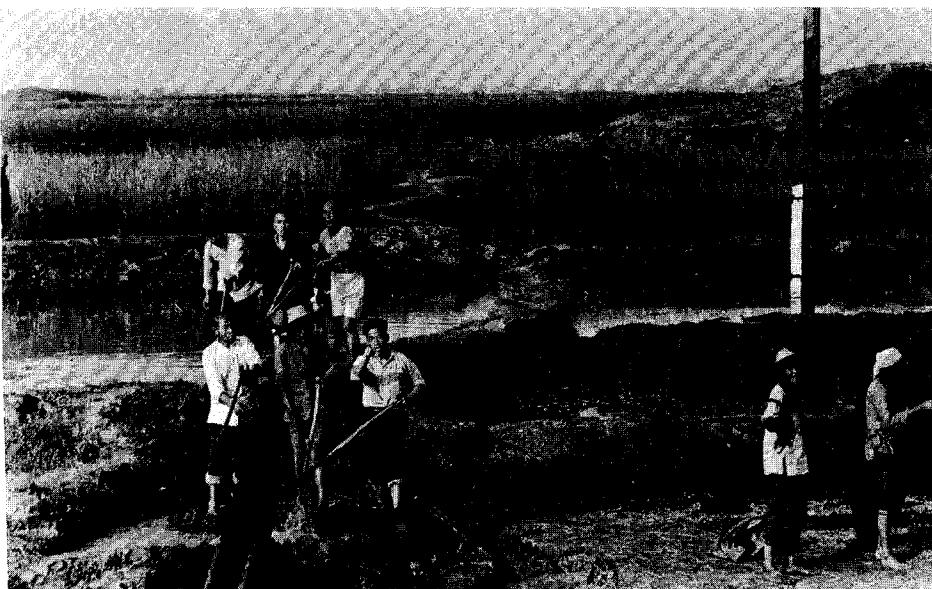




Wuhan to Peking.  
On this occasion dinner was  
served in the compartment

### Scrabbling over China

Note the ubiquitous tea  
mugs, a feature of all  
travel and visits to  
institutions.



"Look, Waygwo Ren!" (foreigner

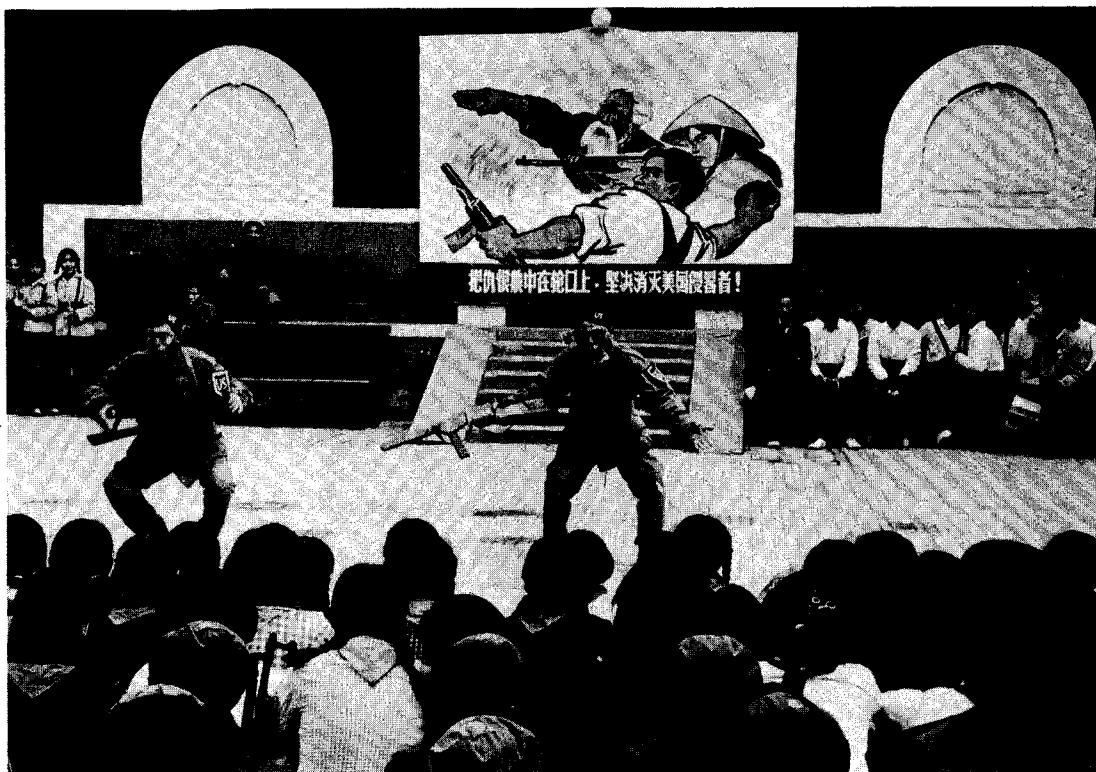
From the Wuhan to Peking  
train



Bei Hai Park, May Day 1965

The setting for the anti-American display shown below

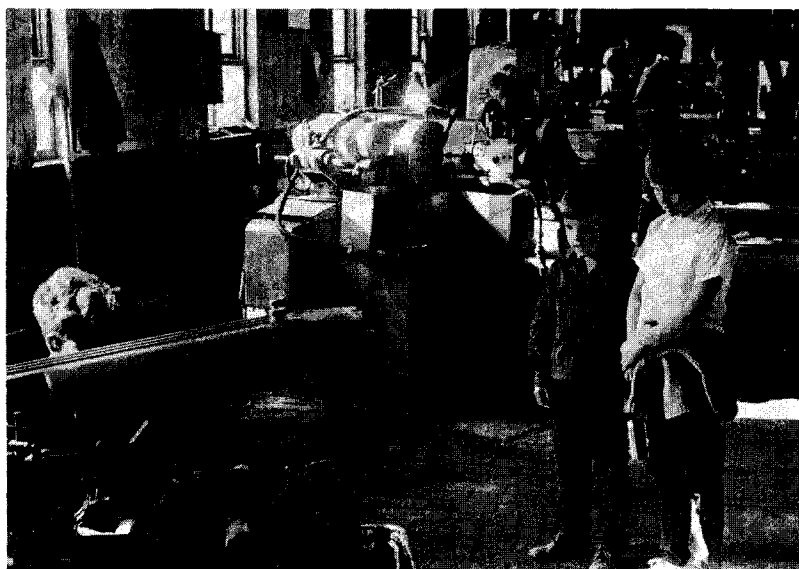
"American soldiers" shiver and shake with fear as the poster depicting Vietnamese states: "Throw all your hate into the gun barrel - resolutely exterminate the American aggressors"







An attentive crowd watch  
acrobats perform in the  
Bei Hai Park in Peking on  
May Day



Janice and Keith watch workers  
in the workshop of the  
China-Hungary Friendship  
Commune near Peking.



"Technical assistance" at  
the China-Hungary Friendship  
Commune



Street scene in Peking.  
Sign above bicycle states  
that it is forbidden to  
leave bicycles on the  
sidewalk!

TIEN AN MEN SQUARE, MAY 1st

