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"Shanghai: City for Sale"

Part II "Construction Fever" and "Relocationphobia" of Urban Residents

BY CHENG LI

SHANGHAI, China

August 1995

The on-going large-scale urban construction and land leasing in Shanghai, as discussed in the first part of this series, usually do not bring good fortune to the residents of the city. Instead, the government policy regarding the relocation of downtown households has caused great anguish among Shanghai citizens.

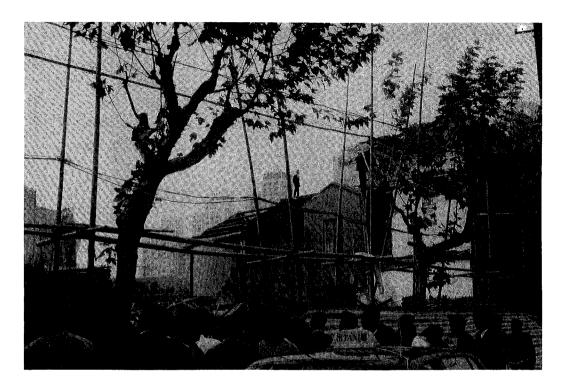
"All the government wants is money; it has no shame," a local resident told a foreign journalist reporting a street protest against the demolition of an old city neighborhood. The protest occurred in the spring of this year. Hundreds of protesters blocked Huaihai Road, the second largest commercial street in the city, to voice their anger and frustration about the ruthless way that the local government had handled the matter.

Residents in the area were told by local officials that they had to move out of their apartments by the beginning of the summer to make way for a commercial development. The local government gave residents in the old neighborhood only two choices of new residential areas into which they could move. Both were located in bleak suburbs where there were no hospitals, no schools, no vegetable or grocery markets. In addition, residents had to pay a large amount of money to the government if they wanted more space in their new homes.

The relocation of residents along Huaihai Road is only one of many relocation projects in this construction-crazy city. Property development is so frantic in Shanghai, as someone described it, that residents are afraid of returning home after work "lest they find the dreaded relocation notice nailed to their doors."²

Government statistics show that about 200,000 households have been resettled over the past several years.³ According to the government plan, another 200,000 households will have to go within a few more years. Residential areas in the Huangpu District and in certain streets in Jingan, Luwan, and Xuhui Districts will be changed to exclusively commercial areas by the end of the 1990s.

"If every household has four people, 400,000 households have a total of 1.6 million people," a technocrat from the Urban Construction Commission under the Shanghai municipal government proudly told me. "Just imagine that 1.6 million people are being relocated within a decade! No other city in the world has experienced such a quick and massive relocation of its residents. Only our



A resident stands on the roof of a three-story building to protest its destruction.

socialist country can accomplish such drastic urban reconstruction!"

What that technocrat probably did not know about, or didn't care about if he knew, is the anger of Shanghai residents and the frequent street protests such as the one that took place on Huaihai Road. During the past two years, residents' protests have occurred in front of the headquarters of the municipal government and district governments many times. The government, however, quickly used force to crack down on street protests.

Some residents refused to move, but construction workers were ordered to tear down the houses where they lived. Last fall, my friend Andrew Browne, the Reuter's correspondent in Shanghai, and I saw a resident standing on the roof of a three-story house to protest while construction workers approached him. This middle-aged man had two rooms in the house, which was located on the corner between Nanjing Road and Tongren Road, near the Portman Shangri-La Hotel. One of the two rooms had been used as a small shop, selling souvenirs to tourists as well as food and drinks. For him, to move out of the downtown area also meant to close his business. He was so frustrated that he decided to refuse to leave even though all his neighbors had already moved.

"We must tear down all the houses in the area by today," an official of the construction team said. The area was leased to a Malaysian commercial company. Consequently, about two thousand families were ordered by the district government to move to a rural suburb of the city. "Otherwise, we have to pay the Malaysian company 200,000 yuan (\$24,000 US) a day according to our contract," the official explained to the spectators. "This is as much as the cost of an Audi car. We cannot afford to wait."

The scene attracted a big crowd. Almost all spectators sympathized with the resident. They asked the construction workers to be patient and shouted:

"Don't drive that resident crazy!"

"Stop tearing down the house!"

"He will jump off the roof if you try to catch him!"

The construction workers decided to tear down other houses first and let the man stay on the roof for the moment.

Andrew and I went to a nearby restaurant for lunch. When we returned, all the houses in the area, including the one with the man on the roof, were torn down. The construction workers and spectators, as well as the resident who had refused to move, were all gone. Later I found a witness who told me that the man had finally given in when the construction workers pushed him to the edge of the roof.

"The workers took him down to the ground and beat him up," the witness told me.

"Why?" I asked.

"They said that the man had scared them and delayed their work," the witness explained. "Some spectators stopped the beating and took the man to a hospital."

"Tears and tantrums, letters and petitions, street protests and even the veiled threat of violence failed to prevent their homes from being flattened like tens of thousands of others in this construction-crazy city," commented Andrew Browne, who has written several reports on the relocation of residents in Shanghai.4

Last fall, Browne interviewed a couple who lived near the Great World Amusement Hall, the central downtown area of Shanghai. The couple worked for a State-owned tour company, which was located in the downtown area. The couple were resentful of the government decision to demolish the neighborhood in which they lived. To protest, the couple brandished a

pellet rifle to defy officials trying to move them out. But in the end the couple, like the resident who stood on the roof, were no match for local housing authorities. They had to move to the newly opened Pudong area, beyond the reach of public transportation.5

Very few people in Shanghai would go as far as the couple with the rifle and the man on the roof in defying authorities, but most residents are resentful of authorities for their heartless efforts in driving them out of downtown Shanghai.

"It is understandable that the municipal government wants to build a new downtown Shanghai to attract foreign investment," a former high school classmate of mine said to me. "As you know, the living conditions of most families in the downtown area are not good at all. Many of them live in tiny attic rooms with no bathroom or kitchen. They don't mind moving from their cramped homes in old houses to spacious apartments in the suburbs. But what has frustrated them is the fact that the government does not pay any attention to their concerns. Authorities are concerned only about vacating the old neighborhood, not about the facilities in new residential areas. They have never thought of the problems and pains that local residents have experienced in changing their homes."

Last month, I sublet a two-bedroom apartment from an old friend of mine. She and her parents used to live in the neighborhood block on busy Chengdu Road and Nanjing Road. Because of the construction of a new overpass on Chengdu Road, they moved out of the area two years ago. During the past two years they crowded in with relatives in the city while waiting for the completion of the apartment assigned to them. A few months ago, my friend's family was finally able to move into an apartment in the Zhenbei Residential Area, located in the northwestern suburbs of Shanghai. My friend let me rent the apartment for the final month of my fellowship in China.

There were about fifty apartment buildings in this newly-built residential area. Each building had six floors and each floor had eight apartments. But, like many other new residential areas in the suburbs of the Shanghai, this large community had no school, no hospital, no post office, no department or grocery stores. The entire neighborhood did not have telephone or gas connections. Garbage was spread everywhere outside apartment buildings because there was no sanitary service in the area. Mice were hunting for food among the garbage even during the daytime.

"You live in this area?" asked Dawn Woodward, a colleague of mine from Hamilton College who visited the apartment. "This looks like land deserted after a war or natural disaster."

"Authorities are concerned

only about vacating the

old neighborhood, not

about the facilities in new

residential areas."

"If Shanghai people can live here, so can I," I replied. "About 2,400 families and a total of 10,000 people live in this neighborhood. From the official viewpoint, this is probably not a bad new residential area at all. At least, it has water and electricity."

During the day of her visit, however, the water supply to the apartment was shut off all day without advance notice.

Most residents in the area had to commute between their new apartments and old work places. But there was no direct bus linking the area to downtown Shanghai. Although a minibus line connected the area to the center of the city, it ran only from 6 am to 5 pm. During a minibus ride, I met a nurse working in the Jing An District Hospital in downtown Shanghai where I worked as a doctor in the early 1980s. She told me that many employees in the hospital have moved to this Zhenbei Residential Area. They now have to spend three extra hours on the road every day.

"We panic when we cannot finish work by 5 pm," the nurse said. "If we miss the minibus, we need to take a taxi, which usually costs 40 yuan, to go home. Forty yuan is about 5% of my monthly salary! How can I afford it? To be honest, I cannot even afford to take the minibus. Four yuan for a round trip minibus daily costs 100 yuan per month. This means I must spend one-eighth of my salary on bus fare." She was angry.

"Things will surely get better," I said.

"Do you really think so?" the nurse responded. Institute of Current World Affairs

The Zhenbei Residential Area. During the final month of my stay in China, I lived in an apartment in a Zhenbei apartment in the northwestern suburbs of Shanghai. The complex community had no school, no hospital, no post office, no department or grocery stores, no telephone, no gas connections. Garbage piled up because there was no sanitary service in the area.



"Shanghai's traffic jam, for example, will never get better, only worse. That's why people who live in Shanghai often say 'I'd never give up a bed in downtown for a room on the outskirts.'

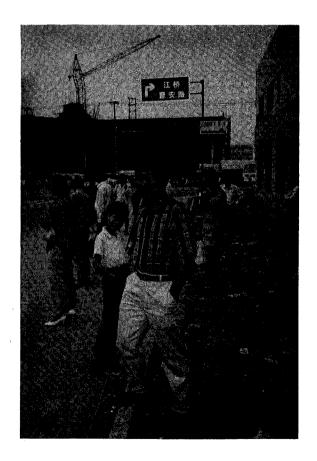
"Things will never get better for ordinary people like me," she added. "My husband and I have not only used up all of our savings, but also borrowed 20,000 yuan for moving expenses and the interior decoration of the apartment.

"Things will get better only for rich and powerful people," she continued. "Life for those speculators in the real estate business and property developers in Shanghai will surely get better. Many of them are the children or relatives of high-ranking officials. They can easily get loans from the State bank, which they use to speculate in the real estate business. This is one of the ways that they become incredibly rich. Only these people can enjoy newly opened elegant stores and luxurious restaurants on Huaihai Road and Nanjing Road. The property boom is actually dividing the city and widening the gap between rich and poor."

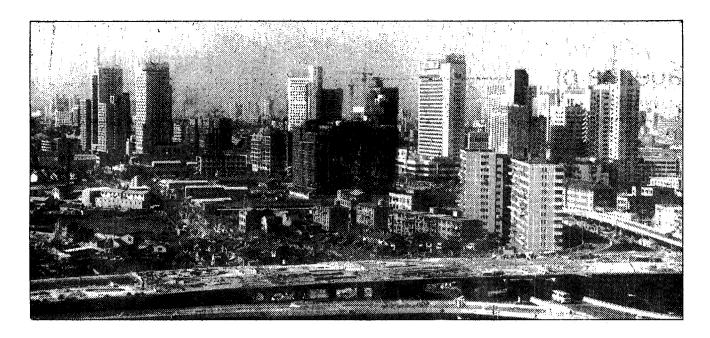
Resentment against the government is widely shared by residents in Shanghai.

"The government wants to attract foreign investors and property developers who sell to rich entrepreneurs," a retired textile worker said. "Everyone wants to make big money and no one cares about us — we are 'small potatoes' (xiaorenwu)." The retired worker told me that she used to shop on Sichuan Road, which was famous for small shops selling cheap odds and ends. Now the small shops are being torn down to make room for high-class department stores.

According to an official 1989 report, about 900,000



What frustrated me—and the other residents of the Zhenbei Residential Area—was the inconvenience of transportation. Although a minibus line connected the area to the center of the city, it ran only from 6 a.m. to 5 p.m. Waiting for the bus and living in this "deserted area" were two of the most memorable experiences during my two-year fellowship in Shanghai.



"Nightless City" — the name of the newly built commercial district near the Shanghai Railway Station. This is one of the largest plots in Shanghai that have been leased to foreign developers. A Hong Kong property company paid \$131 million (US) to lease this area for 50 years. When it is completed, there will be a total of 40 skyscrapers with a total of 324,000 square meters of commercial space (e.g., restaurants and night clubs). (Shanghai Star photo/Wang Rongjiang)

families in Shanghai had insufficient housing (meaning less than 4 square meters per person); among them, 70,000 families had no room at all to live.⁶

"The government should build more roads, schools, hospitals, and low-income housing instead of providing loans for the construction of luxurious villas, nightclubs, expensive shops or golf courses," said a teacher in the primary school that I attended as a young boy. A major part of the school has now become an elegant nightclub mainly for people from Hong Kong and Taiwan.

One of the largest plots that has been leased to foreign developers is a 1.24-square-km area between the Shanghai Railway Station and Suzhou Creek. A Hong Kong property company paid \$131 million (US) to lease this area for 50 years. The area is now named "Nightless City" (buyecheng). When it is completed, there will be a total of 40 skyscrapers with a total of 324,000 square meters of commercial space in this Nightless City.⁷

The central government seems to notice some of the problems involved in the property boom. The State Council sent out a circular to local governments in June 1995, claiming that the construction of expensive office and apartment buildings, garden villas, entertainment centers, night clubs, and golf courses has taken too much capital from the construction of residential housing.⁸

Shanghai residents particularly complained that children of Deng Xiaoping, Chen Yun, and other leaders,

as well as some local officials, have made huge sums of money by leasing land in the city. A real estate official in Shanghai told a journalist from Hong Kong that children of high-ranking officials now move to Shanghai from Beijing to speculate in the real estate industry. They simply told local officials in Shanghai, "My father is so and so – give me land." If you take a bus in Shanghai these days, you will hear many similar stories or rumors about corruption and power abuse involved in property development in the city.

Xu Yin, a well-known writer in Shanghai, wrote an article in *Jiefang Ribao* comparing Li Hongzhang, a top bureaucrat known as a "running dog" of foreign powers at the end of the Qing Dynasty, with current government officials who received commissions by leasing land to foreign companies. The difference between Li Hongzhang and current leaders, Xu concluded, was that the former did not receive kickbacks (*huikou*) from foreigners but the latter did.¹⁰

Some local officials have been punished for wrongdoing involved in land leasing. For example, a deputy head of the Luwan District Government who was in charge of property development on Huaihai Road, was sent to jail in 1994 because he had received bribes from Hong Kong and Taiwan investors. According to Shanghai gossip, the deputy head was only a scapegoat for high-ranking officials in the country.

Construction Fever or Destruction Fever?

"Both Chinese officials and foreign property specu-



In Shanghai, a small garden villa costs \$800,000 (US). Several hundred real estate companies in Shanghai are involved in construction of garden villas. Now they are having difficulty selling them. The house in the picture is under construction by Hillcas International Real Estate Co. Ltd. The property developer is asking \$1 million (US) for this three-bedroom house.



Orville Schell, a distinguished China expert and a good friend of mine, and I visited Erh Dongqiang's private folk art museum, which is located on the outskirts of Shanghai. Erh and his family used to live in an old-style house in downtown Shanghai, which was demolished a few years ago because the land was leased to foreign investors. He kept the house number sign of the old residence (see the back of the photo). Erh's collection of Shanghai handicrafts, like his photojournalist work on Western architecture in old Shanghai, tries to represent the unique characteristics and cultural fabric of the city before it is destroyed by construction fever.

lators in Shanghai are short-sighted," said an economist from Fudan University interviewed by me in Shanghai. The economist, who did not want me to use his name, has done several studies of the real estate industry in Pudong. "The under-supply of fancy hotels and office buildings in the city," said he, "will soon become an over-supply. Property prices will drop in a few years when many of new buildings are available. Only a very few people can afford these expensive apartments and offices. The credit crunch and other problems that occurred on Hainan Island (the most overbuilt area in China) will also occur in Shanghai.

"I'm afraid that Shanghai is experiencing a new version of the Great Leap Forward," the economist continued.

During the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s, millions of Chinese people were ordered by Mao and communist officials to build a 'furnace in the backyard' to produce steel at the expense of the development of agriculture and light industry.

"The on-going large-scale construction of elegant

residential districts and luxurious shopping malls is also achieved at the sacrifice of thousands of ordinary Shanghai residents," the economist commented. "Recent visitors to Shanghai are usually so impressed by the construction boom in the city, especially the mushrooming of skyscrapers here in Shanghai, that they tend to overlook some serious problems caused by reconstruction."

"Some believe that a green belt around the city will be enough. That's like cutting out a person's lung and replacing it with a tube outside the body."

One of the serious problems caused by the property development is the deterioration of the environment of the city. According to one investigation, of a total of 89 public parks and gardens in the city, 27 are going to be leased, either partially or entirely, to foreign companies within a few years. 11 They will no longer be "public" nor parks.

The lack of green landscape is becoming a distinguishing feature of Shanghai. When a plot of land is leased, property developers tend to build higher buildings to obtain more space.

"Green land serves as the lungs of a city," Luo Xiaowei, a distinguished Chinese architect and director of the Shanghai Architecture Society, recently said to the Chinese media. "Some believe that a green belt around the city will be enough. That's like cutting out a person's lung and replacing it with a tube outside the body. It just won't work. Shanghai should have a healthy lung," 12

"The changes taking shape in Shanghai mean different things to different people," Erh Dongqiang (Deke Erh), a Shanghai-born and Shanghai-based freelance

photojournalist, said to me. "Some see most of the changes as a necessary process if Shanghai is to become an economic, financial, and commercial center in the Far East. Others see most of the changes as a destructive force that is undermining the unique characteristics and cultural fabric of the city."

Erh Dongqiang was of course not enthusiastic about what he called the "destruction fever" in Shanghai. In a recent book co-authored with Tess Johnston, a former American diplomat in Shanghai, he observed:

... new victims of urban renewal are now sweeping through Shanghai like a scythe: facades defaced by smoked glass and garish additions, classic old buildings pulled down to make way for widened streets or high-rise complexes.¹³

The book, which includes approximately 250 photos of Shanghai, has an appropriate title: A Last Look: Western Architecture in Old Shanghai. Western-style old architecture is disappearing very quickly in the construction boom. The authors, as they state explicitly, want to give the reader "one last look" before it is too late.

"The Cultural Revolution destroyed many cultural relics in Shanghai, but the on-going construction fever is probably even more destructive," Erh said. "It will wreck the architectural characteristics of the city. I'm afraid that Shanghai is going to lose its sense of style, its reminders of the city's past, and indeed, its sense of history."

In addition to taking photos of the old buildings in Shanghai and tracing their histories, Erh Dongqiang has been collecting handicrafts in both urban and rural Shanghai. He has purchased two old houses on the outskirts of the city and established a small folk art museum — probably the first private folk art museum in the country.

In another newly published book, German Architecture in China, author Torsten Warner, a graduate of Shanghai's Tongji University, traces the German residential complex in Shanghai. The complex, which was completed in 1929 at the corner of today's Huashan and Yanan roads, comprised the German Community Center, the Kaiser Wilhelm School, the German Protestant Church and other buildings. The Protestant Church, designed in the Expressionist style, was demolished during the Cultural Revolution. Buildings for the German Community Center and the Kaiser Wilhelm School were dismantled in recent years. On their sites now stand the Hilton Hotel and the International Equatorial Hotel — two tall and styleless buildings. 14

"Who said that Shanghai does not have style and



Marlboro is the fourth largest advertiser in China, which has become the largest cigarette market in the world. In 1978, when China began opening to the outside world, the Chinese consumed 500 billion cigarettes a year, but in 1992, the number was 1,700 billion.

character?" an old man said sarcastically.

"I call it the 'Marlboro City.' Look at these Marlboro advertisements," the old man pointed to the advertisements on the tall buildings around the park. "These Marlboro advertisements — a strong and handsome American cowboy on horseback with a canvas coat, sporting jeans, and cowboy hat — are everywhere in Shanghai."

This man was in his early 80s. I met him in a tea house at the People's Park in downtown Shanghai a few weeks ago. He refused to tell me his personal background, but he seemed like a well-educated person. He did tell me, however, that he was born in Shanghai and spent his entire life in the city.

"Can you find a better image for Shanghai than the Marlboro City?" the old man challenged me.

The old man might sound too cynical, but Marlboro has indeed become a well-known American icon and a symbol of the western way of life. Like the old man in the tea house, a reporter from the *New Yorker* recently published

an article referring to Shanghai as "a city of Marlboro." 15

What the old man said also reminded me of the article published in *Cankao Xiaoxi*, one of the largest newspapers in China. A Chinese reporter wrote, "The US government has discouraged its citizens from smoking cigarettes, but it encourages Japan, Taiwan, Korea and Thailand to open their tobacco markets." Even more unfortunate for people in East Asia, the reporter said, "China has now become the largest cigarette market in the world." According to scientists at Oxford University, the number of Chinese men who will die from lung cancer will increase from 30,000 in 1978 to 900,000 in 2025.17

"Over 150 years ago," grumbled the old man in the tea house, "'foreign devils' (guilao) exported opium to China. Now they are selling cigarettes to the China market. Some foreign biochemical factories here have not only polluted China's environment, but have even sold banned medicine to the Chinese people." 18

"After the Liberation in 1949, everyone in Shanghai was familiar with a popular song" the old man started

to hum the tune. "Socialism is wonderful ... the imperialists ran off with their tails between their legs."

"Now," the old man said, "someone has rewritten the words of the song: "Capitalism is wonderful ... the imperialists are back with wallets under their arms." I told the old man that I heard this "new version" of the song at a popular music concert.

"Are you optimistic or pessimistic about Shanghai's future?" I asked the old man.

"What do you mean by optimistic or pessimistic?" the old man responded. "Everyone is talking about changes in Shanghai, for better or for worse, but no one

has ever asked about the meaning of these changes. I don't know about the future, nor can I even understand the past and present.

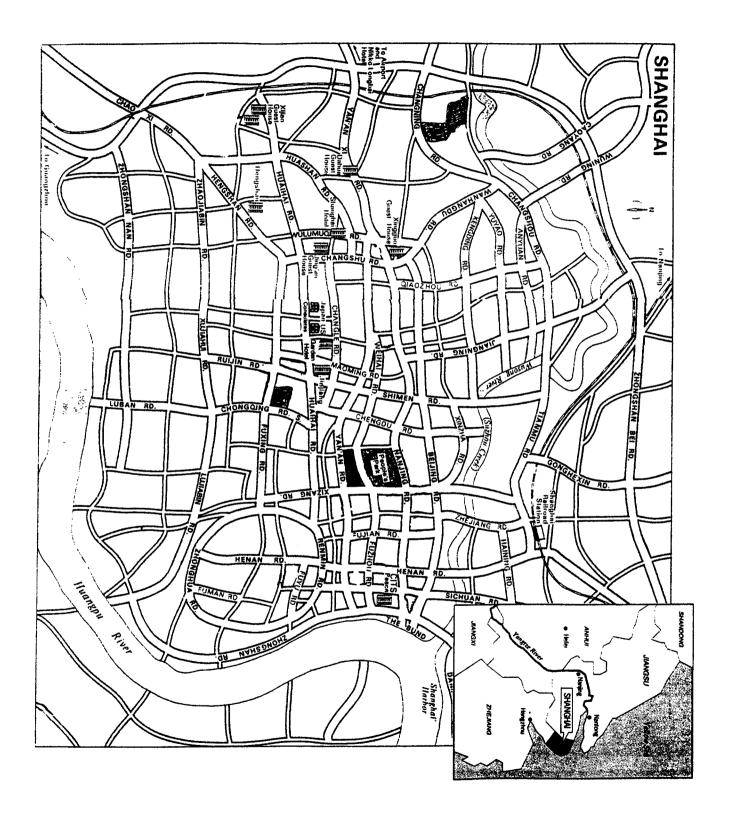
"You are a professor of Chinese studies," the old man challenged me once more. "Can you tell me the meaning of all these changes happening in Shanghai or China over the century?"

"Hum, ... well, ..." I said, and then realized I could not say anything meaningful.

"Some believe that the world is becoming worse and some think it is getting better," the old man concluded. In my view, the world is just turning around as usual."

END NOTES:

- 1. Quoted from Andrew Browne, "Shanghai Housing Protest Blocks: Golden Mile Road." Reuter's News Service, (Shanghai), March 10, 1995.
- 2. Henny Sender, "Stopping the Gold Rush," Far Eastern Economic Review, August 12, 1993, p. 70.
- 3. Andrew Browne, "Shanghai Housing Protest Blocks: Golden Mile Road." Reuter's News Service, (Shanghai), March 10, 1995.
- 4. Andrew Browne, "Ugly Capitalism: Property Boom Sparks Shanghai Anger" Reuter's News Service, (Shanghai), Dec. 12, 1994.
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- 15. Quoted from *Cankao xiaoxi* (Reference news), Dec. 19, 1993, p. 8.
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Current Fellows & Their Activities

Hisham Ahmed, Born blind in the Palestinian Dheisheh Refugee Camp near Bethlehem, Hisham finished his A-levels with the fifth highest score out of 13,000 students throughout Israel. He received a B.A. in political science on a scholarship from Illinois State University and his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of California in Santa Barbara. Back in East Jerusalem and still blind. Hisham plans to gather oral histories from a broad selection of Palestinians to produce a "Portrait of Palestine" at this crucial point in Middle Eastern history. [MIDEAST/N. AFRICA]

Adam Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is spending two years studying and writing about Turkey's regional role and growing importance as an actor in the Balkans, the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/ RUSSIÁI

Cynthia Caron. With a Masters degree in Forest Science from the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, Cynthia is spending two years in South Asia as ICWA's first John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow. She is studying and writing about the impact of forest-preservation projects on the lives (and land-tenure) of indigenous peoples and local farmers who live on their fringes. Her fellowship includes stays in Bhutan, India and Sri Lanka. [SOUTH ASIA/Forest & Society]

William F. Foote. Formerly a financial analyst with Lehman Brothers' Emerging Markets Group, Willy Foote is examining the economic substructure of Mexico and the impact of freemarket reforms on Mexico's people, society and politics. Willy holds a Bachelor's degree from Yale University (history), a Master's from the London School of Economics (Development Economics; Latin America) and studied Basque history in San Sebastian, Spain. He carried out intensive Spanish-language studies in Guatemala in 1990 and then worked as a copy editor and Reporter for the Buenos Aires Herald from 1990 to 1992. [THE AMERICAS]

Cheng Li. An Assistant Professor of Government at Hamilton College in Clinton, NY, Cheng Li is studying the growth of technocracy and its impact on the economy of the southeastern coast of China. He began his academic life by earning a Medical Degree from Jing An Medical School in Shanghai, but then did graduate work in Asian Studies and Political Science in the United States, with an M.A. from Berkeley in 1987 and a Ph.D. from Princeton in 1992. [EAST **ASIA1**

Sharon Griffin. A feature writer and contributing columnist on African affairs at the *San Diego* Union-Tribune, Sharon is spending two years in southern Africa studying Zulu and the KwaZulu kingdom and writing about the role of nongovernmental organizations as fulfillment centers for national needs in developing countries where governments are still feeling their way toward effective administration. She plans to travel and live in Namibia and Zimbabwe as well as South Africa. [sub-SAHARA]

Pramila Jayapal. Born in India, Pramila left when she was four and went through primary and secondary education in Indonesia. She graduated from Georgetown University in 1986 and won an M.B.A. from the Kellogg School of Management in Evanston, Illinois in 1990. She has worked as a corporate analyst for PaineWebber and an accounts manager for the world's leading producer of cardiac defibrillators, but most recently managed a \$7 million developingcountry revolving-loan fund for the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Seattle. Pramila is spending two years in India tracing her roots and studying social issues involving religion, the status of women, population and AIDS. [SOUTH ASIA]

Teresa C. Yates. A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a juris doctor from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution. While with the ACLU, she also conducted a Seminar on Women in the Law at Fordham Law School in New York. [sub-SAHARA]

Author: Institute of Current World Affairs

Title: ICWA Letters - East Asia

ISSN: 1083-4265 Imprint: Hanover, NH

Material Type: Serial Language: English Frequency: Monthly

Other Regions: South Asia; Mideast/North Africa;

Europe/Russia; SubSaharan Africa;

The Americas

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ICWA LETTERS

ISSN 1083-4265

ICWA Letters are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501 (c) (3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755.

The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers with indexes by subscription.

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