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the people and societies of inland China.*

ICWA LETTERS

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“Real China”

—U.S. Congress Visits Guizhou—

Guiyang, GUIZHOU, China

AUGUST 1999

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Executive Director
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4 West Wheelock St.
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Dear Peter,

On the last evening of their China tour, a delegation of U.S. congressmen, spouses, staff and Heritage Foundation officials took seats around joined tables in an Italian restaurant in Beijing’s posh International Club Hotel. The occasion: a private dinner for the six lawmakers to reflect on their visit to China — a first for each of them. In less than a week, the delegation had traveled to Taipei, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Guiyang and Beijing.

As everyone settled into their chairs, Rep. Samuel Johnson, in a relaxed Texas drawl, asked Heritage Foundation President Ed Feulner if he could say a few words.

“When I was in Vietnam for those years in solitary confinement, those of us who had been imprisoned developed ways to communicate with each other between our cells. Every Sunday morning, for example, several stomps on the floor meant a call to kneel and pray.

“Our messaging got fairly sophisticated — I even learned French through tapping on the walls.

“To speed communication, we combined coughing and spitting sounds with the light strikes on the wall, like at the end of each day when someone would ‘*cough, cough... spit... cough,*’ meaning G-B-U, or God bless you.

“Now here in Beijing, sitting around this table at the end of a very full trip, I’d like it if we could just bow our heads and thank the Lord for these days we’ve had together, for the experience, for the learning and the safety we’ve enjoyed....”

Dinner was served. Ed Feulner then turned to Congressman Joseph Pitts of Pennsylvania to recount his journey to Guizhou Province. Just the day before, Rep. Pitts, his wife Ginny and chief-of-staff Bill Wichterman, accompanied by officials from the Chinese People’s Institute of Foreign Affairs (CPIFA) and Chinese Embassy in Washington, had returned from a day-long visit to Guizhou Province — the first ever by a U.S. Congressman.

I could almost see the other members salivating as Congressman Pitts recalled his experience.

“Guizhou is the poorest province in China when measured by per-capita



Rep. Pitts and Zhang Keyuan, Counselor, Chinese Embassy, look at a map of Guizhou Province as their plane heads from Shanghai to Guiyang.

GDP. It's flush with green mountains, though only ten percent arable. Ethnically, the province is diverse; there are more than thirty ethnic groups represented in Guizhou.

"After we arrived at Guiyang's beautiful new airport, we went directly to a little resort just outside the city where people sat in paddle boats and along the riverbanks, doing what most folks do when they have some free time on the weekends: relaxing with family and friends. The villa we had lunch in and a meeting afterward was built for and used by then-Premier Zhou Enlai and his wife in 1961."

"Sitting in Zhou Enlai's suite, we met for almost two hours with Chinese and American participants in a project sponsored by the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations to support the growth of private education in Guizhou Province. Among the group were four energetic, vo-tech, high school principals, reform-minded policy officials and three educators from America's Appalachian region. Guizhou's leaders want more competition in their education system; they want to improve quality.

"After that, we visited a nearby village elemen-

tary school, wading through children as they chanted welcomes. You could see the awe in their eyes as it appeared this might have been the first time they had ever seen foreigners. We even visited two village homes. Everywhere we went they offered us tea and sunflower seeds, all homegrown. The family we spoke with had purchased their own home — privately owned. When I asked how they paid for it, they said by raising pigs. Then they took us right around the corner and showed us their pigs! These people belonged to the Buyi ethnic group. You should have heard their traditional music and seen the bull fighting poster on their door.

"We saw real China. We ate authentic Chinese food — the real stuff. At the evening banquet with the provincial leaders, they had liquor that kicked like a horse. You stand up to toast each other and then turn your shot glass up-side-down to prove you've finished it. It's all quite intimate as you get up from your seat and walk over to the person you want to toast, say a few words and drink to them.

"I spoke with Guizhou's leaders quite a bit about sister relationships with our state and counties and plan to follow through when I return home.

"The morning before we left, my wife Ginny and I looked out from our Holiday Inn window down onto an open market in full swing. It was amazing. There were just-slaughtered pigs and fresh vegetables. Everything was sold and done by breakfast time.

"We experienced real China."

The other congressmen sat entranced as they heard of a China beyond the windows of luxury tour buses and



Rep. Joseph and Virginia Pitts pose on verandah of villa overlooking the Huaxi River outside Guiyang, the same porch where then-Premier Zhou Enlai had his portrait taken with his wife, Deng Yingchao, in 1961. The picture of Zhou and Deng became their favorite.

outside the walls of the country's finest hotels and high-security government buildings.

This is not to say, however, that the other congressmen were disappointed with their tour. Each expressed satisfaction with their experience. And this despite the lectures they received on Taiwan, hesitant responses on jump-starting talks on China's accession to the World Trade Organization and chilled replies to queries on human rights.

In fact, it is precisely the present frost in U.S.-China relations that made the congressmen's visit so significant.

But it was Rep. Pitts, above all, who had the best opportunity to exercise one of the U.S. Congress's greatest capacities, something that it would not hurt congressmen to do more of in China: to press the flesh with people, listening to those who are doing the best with what they have.

Pitts did it well. The peaceful, diligent manner with which the congressman asked questions and listened won him good rapport among all those he met in Guizhou — from the high-school principals, to the elderly ethnic-minority farmer who served him sunflower seeds, to Liu Fangren, the provincial "number one."

Nothing can substitute for high-level, face-to-face encounters between Congress and senior Chinese leaders in Beijing. Even if they are at times unpleasant discourses or less-than titillating introductions to China's 5,000-year-old civilization, the meetings provide requisite passage through the front door of communication between the countries' two capitals.

At the same time, however, congressmen do not just represent their country; they speak on behalf of their constituents. As people's representatives, these men and women should have the instincts and desires to reach beyond China's "beltway" toward the masses — to listen to those "out in the districts" who have profound things to say about their country's present and its future.

Twenty-four hours is not a long time. But it was long enough for Congress, through the eyes and touch of one of its members, spouse and staff, to encounter something it had never seen before. And in so doing, to gain insight into one more piece of the Chinese puzzle.

More important than impressions, however, Congressman Pitts' visit to Guizhou Province opened opportunity for new channels of communication — and increased



Congressman Pitts meets with Guizhou Province Party Secretary Liu Fangren. The televised meeting was the lead story on the evening news and made headlines in the following day's newspaper.



"Kicks like a horse." Rep. Pitts and Party Secretary Liu toast each other with Maotai, perhaps Guizhou's most famous product — a fiery spirit well over 100 proof.

exchange almost always increases understanding.

As relations between Beijing and Washington remain challenged, U.S. congressmen would do well to consider more travel to where most of China's 1.2 billion people live: the nation's heartland.

I cannot help but wonder how different Congress's understanding of China, and legislation, would be if each delegation-visit to China included a provincial capital stop. With the convenience of flights and accommodations nowadays it can be done, even within a restricted seven-day travel limit. Pitts proved it.

In fact, the biggest obstacles facing Congress' access



to “real China” today are their own schedulers and the desire to listen.

Congressmen need not become “China experts,” but they should choose to broaden their experience of China and sources of understanding beyond Beijing and Shanghai. Otherwise, the U.S. Congress will continue to hear only one-size-fits-all lectures and miss the dynamic of a people amid dramatic transition.

Indeed, it’s amazing what can be understood when one truly desires to listen and communicate. Who knows? Maybe even those faint tapping, coughing and spitting sounds coming from the other side of the wall would begin to make sense.

Sincerely,

Team Guizhou — the Pitts’ delegation participants, photographed in front of China’s State Guest House, Diaoyutai (L to R): former U.S. Ambassador to Nepal and National Committee on U.S.-China Relations’ Board Member Julia Chang Bloch, Rep. and Mrs. Pitts, Pitts’ Chief of Staff Bill Wichterman, and author.



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Author: Wright, Daniel B.

Title: ICWA Letters - East Asia

ISSN: 1083-4265

Imprint: Institute of Current World
Affairs, Hanover, NH

Material Type: Serial

Language: English

Frequency: Monthly

Other Regions: Sub-Saharan Africa;
South Asia, Mideast/North
Africa; Europe/Russia;
The Americas

ICWA Letters (**ISSN 1083-4265**) 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 by subscription.

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