

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JYB-1

The Long March to China

1575 Summerhill Ave.
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April 21st 1976Mr Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
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Dear Mr Nolte

Since the late 1960's, China's international relations have gone through a drastic and permanent change. Relations between China and a large number of countries have opened up and developed at an unexpected rate. This sometimes happened in a dramatic way such as the admission of China to the United Nations and the first visit ever of a United States president to China. Also, there is no doubt that in the last few years China's role and influence on the international scene have been visibly growing. For example, private citizen Nixon's recent visit to China was considered by a number of people as an attempt to influence the choice of the next U.S. president. Whether this is true or to what extent, is not as important as the fact that it was perceived as such.

Parallel to, and because of, this development, an interesting though less dramatic phenomenon took place. More and more people from all over the world had the opportunity to visit China, mainly on tours organized by the Chinese authorities. These tours were not just for sight-seeing. They included visits to all sorts of institutions that China was keen to show the world, from plants to communes, from children's palaces to nurseries, in a word, her social and economic achievements of the last twenty or so years. Usually these visits generated the overall following impressions:

- When compared to what was "the sick man of Asia", present day China presents a definite improvement in the welfare of her people.
- This was achieved by following a unique social and economic developmental approach.

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Expressions such as the "Chinese experience", the "Chinese model", the "Maoist model", etc... became common in our vocabulary. People asked what can the Third World learn from China's experience? Or for that matter, what can the West learn from this experience? For example, to explore this latter question, a series of meetings took place in October 1972 at Columbia University. The papers presented at these meetings were edited by Michel Oksenberg into a book entitled China's Developmental Experience.

It is to study China's developmental strategies and more particularly her science and technology policies for development and their implications to the Third World, that I was awarded an Institute fellowship. For such a study to be more concrete, visits to China are a must, allowing, one hopes, direct observation and on-hand inquiries on the micro-level. It is the long, tortuous, at times hopeful, at times discouraging process to secure a visa to China that I am about to narrate to you.

In my attempts to obtain a visa I followed two separate lines. The first hopefully leading to a three to six weeks trip, the second, a one to two years stay. The idea of a trip for a few weeks to China came to life in 1973, during my association with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. A number of inquiries carried out both in the United States and in Canada clearly indicated that, since I was a Canadian landed immigrant, my best bet to go to China was via Canada, initiating the proper procedures with the Chinese Embassy in Ottawa. Also, I learned that the Center for East Asian Studies at McGill University, headed by Professor Paul T.K. Lin, put emphasis on contemporary China studies and encourages the development of academic relations with the People's Republic of China.

So early in the Fall of 1974, we found ourselves back in Montreal. To help me get through Montreal's long hibernation, I took Chinese language as well as contemporary Chinese history courses, read on China's economy, taught part of a political science course on Modern China and Japan, and, of course, began the long procedure of requesting a visa to visit China.

My early approach was to ask for a three to four weeks individual visit. As it would have been my first visit, I thought that it should be of a general nature, however, slightly biased to satisfy my specific area of interest. This request was submitted to the Embassy in a letter followed by a visit to Ottawa shortly after. The Embassy's

response was, as I feared but expected, that due to lack of resources to accomodate numerous requests to visit China, an individual visit would be difficult to organize. Joining a group would be simpler and give a better chance to get a visa. I left it with the Embassy that I shall consider the second alternative only if the first fails. It was December 1974.

Then followed the usual period where nothing happens or seems to happen. Until May 1975 when I received a clear indication that my original request would most probably not be granted. Was I willing to accept the second alternative? Yes. The offer to join a group for an August trip came in June. How untimely! My involvement in the China Pavilion at Man & His World as its Deputy Director was total, to say the least. Accepting the offer would mean that I would be away for more than a third of Man & His World season, with not enough time to prepare myself for the trip. A difficult but necessary decision had to be taken. I asked for a postponement.

Last October, an education delegation from China visited Canada. Following discussions with members of the delegation in Montreal, I found out that the best alternative to an individual visit was to form a small group of three to five people with similar interests and to ask for a group visa. This alternative, I was told, should present the optimum combination of being accepted by Chinese authorities and of being beneficial to the group members. A group of five people was formed and a request for a visa was submitted in November. The Embassy stated it would be relayed to Peking.

When a registered letter with the Embassy's return address on the envelope arrived on a cold February morning, I knew what news it carried. More often than not, good news regarding visas to China come by phone, early in the morning. Other types of news come by letter. Mine was no exception.

One of the many benefits to the development of relations between Canada and China was the establishment of the first student exchange program between the two countries, which came into effect in the Fall of 1973. About the same period, China reactivated similar programs discontinued during the Cultural Revolution, and established new ones with many other countries. The agreement provides

the opportunity for a number of people, twenty in the case of Canada, to spend one to two years in the other country party to the agreement studying languages and other subjects of interest.

These programs give the rare opportunity for young men and women on both sides to live and study in a society previously totally alien to them. Although the foreign exchange students in China are often limited in their activities, however it seems much less now than earlier on, the exchanges are still an important development since there was nothing of the sort before. Of course, I wanted to be part of it and applied for the 1976-1977 Canada-China exchange. However, two major hurdles had to be crossed if I were to see myself in the Peking Language Institute in September 1976: take out Canadian citizenship and start proceedings for obtaining visas for Brenda and Anna to accompany me to China.

When a candidate to the exchange program is selected, an individual visa is then issued. Now, for the spouse and children to accompany this lucky person, their visas must be requested separately from the Chinese authorities. If it is at all possible for the spouse to find a job such as teaching a foreign language during the stay in China, then the chances of a positive outcome are enhanced. Otherwise they are nil. The decision to offer a foreigner a job is, of course, left entirely to the discretion of the Chinese authorities. Although this sounds hopeless it is not impossible to do. I know of two Canadian couples with children who successfully followed this approach in 1973.

But before coming to the stage described above, I had to apply and be selected to the exchange program. When I submitted my application to the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) which administer the program for the Canadian government, I met all requirements but one. I was not Canadian yet, though I had already applied for citizenship in mid-October 1975. After negotiations with the AUCC, it was agreed that:

- although at the time of closing of submission of applications I was not technically eligible for the fellowship, the AUCC would recognize my application, and
- be willing to consider it as valid if, at the time of selection planned for the second half of January 1976, I could present proof of my Canadian citizenship.

The question was then to speed up the citizenship procedures with the Secretary of State. Normally, following

an application for citizenship, one has to wait for the statutory delay of three months to end to appear before a court for a judge to determine whether one is qualified to become a Canadian citizen. After that there is another four to six weeks delay before obtaining the certificate of citizenship. Consultations with a number of people, including lawyers and a Court of Citizenship judge - a relative of a friend of mine from the Université de Montréal - indicated that there was no way for me to have the statutory delay shortened. However, the judge offered that I appear before her court in due course, and promised that, assuming I were to be considered qualified to become Canadian, she would make sure that my certificate of citizenship be issued as soon as possible.

Exactly three months following the date of submission of my application, I appeared before my friend the judge who qualified me for the citizenship. At her suggestion, she wrote a letter to the AUCC to notify it of the court decision. Also, she told me that I will be on the next scheduled ceremony to swear allegiance to the Queen and to receive the certificate.

The ceremony was on February 2nd at 9:00 o'clock. That morning the radio announced that Montreal was having its worst snow storm of the year with wind gusting at sixty five miles an hour. Warnings were issued not to go out unless one absolutely had to. Well, I had to! It was not until I went out of the apartment building that I realized the severity and savageness of the storm. Bracing myself, I walked to the bus. The ride was slow but uneventful. However, getting off the bus at the normally windy corner of Dorchester and University, things started to happen. The wind was so strong, I was twice swept off my feet onto the ground and proceeded on a flight across Dorchester boulevard. Fortunately I was able to stop myself by catching on to a bus stop. Realizing I was safe, for the moment at least, I looked up and saw I was not the only one in difficulty. Many other people shared my fate.

It took me twenty five minutes and another bus ride to get all of one block to my intended destination. The ceremony began an hour and a half late. Only fifty five out of one hundred and fifty four expected people showed up. At the end of the ceremony, after everybody had sworn allegiance to Queen Elizabeth II and received their certificate, we were asked to stand up and sing together O Canada. The judge sang vigorously together with the court clerk

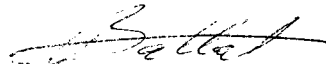
and his assistant. Fifty five new Canadians just stood there listening. The judge adjourned the court and walked to me saying: "Chez nous on se donne la bise!" And in front of everybody I received privileged treatment as a new Canadian: she hugged me and placed a kiss on each of my cheeks, the way we do it in Quebec! Now I was ready to brave the elements to go back home.

The AUCC was kept informed at all stages of the development of my citizenship request. The day after my citizenship application was finally accepted, I learned from the AUCC that the selection committee had met a week before and, following a long discussion with representatives of the Department of External Affairs and the AUCC, it had to declare my application ineligible since I was not then Canadian. I was encouraged to apply for the next year. Attempts on my part to have the AUCC reconsider its decision were unsuccessful.

In the Embassy's registered letter turning down my request for a small delegation to visit China, it was mentioned that, if I am interested to join a group visiting China, I could contact the Embassy or the China International Travel Service in Peking. I said to myself: "Here we go again, starting from square one." In my reply to the Embassy I asked what suitable groups, if any, were scheduled to visit China that I could join eventually. To my great surprise, two weeks later, I was asked whether I would be interested to join a Carleton University group of teachers and students visiting China for three weeks in May. My answer was positive. Could my wife go with the group too?

Just one week later at 9:00 o'clock in the morning, a representative of the Embassy phoned to inform us that arrangements had been made with the Carleton University group as well as with the China International Travel Service for Brenda and me to spend three weeks in China. Again there was no exception in how good news is delivered.

Yours sincerely



Joseph Y. Battat

Received in New York on April 28, 1976