

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JYB-2

A China Trip

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November 26 1976

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Dear Mr Nolte

This is the first in a series of newsletters reporting on the trip Brenda and I made to China last May.

In mid-March 1976, representatives from the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Ottawa suggested that if Brenda and I were willing to be attached to a Canadian group of visitors to China, they would go ahead and make the necessary arrangements with the concerned parties in China and Canada. The Embassy recommended the Carleton University tour headed by Professor Robert E. Bedeski, for various reasons including timing of the visit, size of the group, and degree of compatibility of interest. That was the first concrete response from the Embassy to my previous requests, spread over more than a year, to visit China. I knew then that my first visit to China was close at hand.

Indeed it was, for less than two weeks following our acceptance of the offer, the Embassy informed us that it had received the green light from Peking and Professor Bedeski had agreed to us joining his tour. At the same time this was confirmed in writing by the Head Office of the China International Travel Service. Five days after filing our applications our passports were stamped with the visas.

On May 1st, at eight o'clock in the morning, we joined the Carleton University group at the airport in Ottawa, and soon were bound for Tokyo via Vancouver. The

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group of twenty six were mainly from the university including one faculty, one university administrator, eight students, one orthopedist, one nuclear physicist, two civil servants, three librarians, one education consultant and one photographer. That morning one could sense the contained excitement and heightened expectation built up by weeks, if not months, of preparation. But also there were signs that the group was closer to experiencing unknown quantities. How would the group react to a society so totally different from its own? How would the twenty six people fare living and sharing this experience together as a group for the next three weeks? What would the itinerary finally be? What were we going to see there? These and many more questions were on our minds.

One may say that we entered China when we boarded the Civil Aviation Administration of China's (CAAC) Boeing 707 at Tokyo Haneda International Airport on May 4, bound for Peking. Entering from the rear of the plane, we were greeted by three female hostesses wearing an open neck white shirt under a silver blue pant suit. Their "uniform", as worn by thousands if not millions of Chinese women, set the tone of a plain and simple, bordering on the austere, flight service. While I was happy to see the service performed denuded of all its false glamor, I wished that the crew had more contact with the passengers. When not performing their basic tasks such as serving meals, refreshments and offering cigarettes, the crew confined itself to its assigned compartments at either end of the plane. One of the hostesses, on retrieving an untouched tray of food from one of the passengers, showed real concern that the passenger did not feel like eating, but also one could sense her displeasure that food could be wasted in this way. This was a preview of what we were to observe in terms of values held in China.

After an unscheduled two-hour stop in Shanghai due to an unusually late in the season sandstorm in Peking, we reached our final destination close to midnight. There was nothing unusual in the way we cleared immigration. However, while clearing customs, I was to have a glimpse of Chinese organizational style which reminded me of guerilla warfare tactics. It was interesting to note how the team of customs officers handled their job with so few available resources: i.e. a customs area too small to even hold half a Boeing 707's load of passengers, and a small staff of six or seven people at the most. The

organization of the team's work centered around a young man whom I presumed to be the team leader. He seemed to be in perpetual motion, constantly checking the flow of passengers and the work progress of his colleagues. He seemed to know that most of the passengers were part of touring groups. So for each group, he enlisted the help of one of its members to direct his companions, as they filed past the immigration booth, to form a separate line. He then shifted to it one or two customs officers to get the processing of the line in motion. By judiciously concentrating his staff and moving them around, he was able to keep the number of the lines down to two and keep the situation under his control. Whether he gave his colleagues instructions quietly over the counter or shouted them across the hall, he was met with quick and effective responses. Despite the sustained fast pace of work there was no obvious tension or friction among the customs officers and all the passengers were soon cleared.

That the non-industrial per capita consumption of energy in China is many fold less than that of the Western countries was illustrated to me on the bus ride from the airport into Peking. By the time we left the terminal to get on the bus it was already past midnight. A couple of bulbs lit up the terminal's front steps leading to the awaiting bus beyond which it was impossible to see it was so dark. It was extremely difficult to distinguish the markets, the residential and industrial areas that the guides were pointing out to us on our way to the Peking Hotel. In fact we were only three minutes from the hotel located in the heart of Peking, driving on Chang An Boulevard, one of the main arteries of the capital, before I could tell that we were actually in the city. During the ride of approximately twenty minutes, we saw less than two dozen motor vehicles on the road and passed a few clusters of workers riding bicycles to or from factories for the change of midnight shift. It was an uncanny feeling to see such deserted streets when one knows one is in the center of a city of more than six million people. But what a contrast when, the next morning, lit by bright sunshine, the scene in front of the hotel was like a hive with thousands and thousands of people in the street, the atmosphere filled with the sound of bicycle bells and car horns, and the hustle and bustle of a lively city!

When touring China, the desire to learn as much as possible about the country, visiting places and talking to people clashes with ever-present restrictions such as limited time and human energy. This is the dilemma the host organization in China, in our case the China International Travel Service, is constantly faced with when planning the itinerary and program of activities for visitors. Nevertheless, and to my liking, quite a busy schedule was worked out for us. Apart from a few free evenings, basically every moment of our stay in China was part of a planned schedule. The day started when we got up at about six thirty in the morning and rarely did we retire to our hotel room before eleven at night, after quite an energetic day.

The tour was intended to be of a general nature, with no particular focus. And so it was. We were introduced to various aspects of China's educational system, her industry and agriculture, and many facets of the daily life in China. Also a good amount of time was set aside for sightseeing, visiting museums and attending cultural and artistic performances.

We visited institutions at three different levels of the Chinese formal education system. In Nanking, we spent half a day at the Zhong Shan Road Primary School and the kindergarten attached to it. We visited one middle school (equivalent to a high-school) of the Peking South New China Street Middle School District. There we were shown, among other things, the school's workshops where students produce frequency sensitive rheostats and oil tubing for truck brakes, as part of the productive labor component of their education. We learned also that the school has a branch in Changping county, thirty kilometers outside of Peking with an area of a hundred and twenty mu (twenty acres approximately) of cultivated land, where students engage in agronomic studies as well as in physical labor. On May 8, during a visit to the famous Tsinghua University, we were able to roam freely around the area where wall posters were pasted (we were told that, altogether, close to 10,000 were put up) attacking Teng Hsiao-ping and his policies. Later, during a question-answer period, we listened to the physicist Professor Chien Wei-chang giving a history of his ideological remoulding accompanied by a strong self-criticism. In China, for children in grades one to six (ranging from ages 7 to 16), the major institution for extracurricular child development is the Children's Palace. We had the

opportunity to visit one in Shanghai where every afternoon about six hundred children from all schools in the district take part in physical education activities, and in the development of their talents, be they artistic, such as ballet dancing, playing musical instruments, painting, paper cutting, puppeteering, etc..., or engineering, such as model plane and ship building, making radio receivers, etc..., or medical, such as giving first aid or acupuncture treatments.

We payed a visit to three plants: a textile factory producing 400,000 meters of cloth a day in Shihchiachuang, capital of Hopei Province; a high-tension insulator factory in Sian, Shensi Province, where we listened to the Director of the Office under the factory's Revolutionary Committee denouncing in strong terms the incompetent and profit-motivated Soviet assistance given to the plant in the latter part of the 1950's; finally the Shanghai Machine Tools Plant, famous for its "July 21 Workers College" (named in commemoration of Mao Tse-tung's July 21st 1968 directive on training technicians from among workers in plant-run colleges), a forerunner of thousands of similar colleges in China today. At the Peking Arts and Handicrafts Factory, we had the opportunity to see in production exquisite pieces of art such as cloisonne and lacquer vases, ivory, jade and rose quartz carvings, traditional style paintings, ... The visit to the Shanghai Industrial Exhibition, to which I was so much looking forward, proved to be extremely disappointing. Not only had we to race through it because of time constraint, but the guides at the exhibition were unable to provide any information whatsoever beyond the brief introduction they gave of the products in the stall at which they were stationed. When I expressed my disappointment to one of our guides, I learned that technically competent guides are on duty in the afternoons when commercial and technical visitors are brought to the exhibition. In Nanking we went to the Nanking Bridge, one of the Chinese people's prides in their technical achievements.

We got a glimpse into China's agricultural system and peasant life through visits to three production brigades located in two different regions in China: Hsiao Chia Ying Production Brigade outside of Shihchiachuang, the famous Tachai in Hsiyang county, Shansi Province, and Shih Ping Production Brigade in the same county. The latter was selected as an example of a "bad" brigade which, up to the end of the Cultural Revolution, refused to emulate its neighbor Tachai. When in Shihchia-

chuang, and at my request, our guides arranged for me to visit an exhibition on water management in Hopei Province.

Naturally many other facets of life in China were also observed. To name a few: a Neighborhood Committee, the lowest administrative level in urban areas in China; the Norman Bethune International Peace Hospital in Shih-chiachuang and medical clinics both in urban and rural areas; a workers residential area in Shanghai; food markets, department stores, bookstores,...

Apart from a few exceptions, the format of these tours was basically the same. The group would arrive at whatever institution it was to visit, accompanied by the guides. A welcoming party representing various levels of the organization would be waiting for us outside, and following a round of hand shaking, would lead us to a meeting room where each of us would have a constantly refilled cup of tea. Once the hosting group had been introduced, the briefing would start. It would begin with a denunciation of Teng Hsiao-ping and his policies (only once or twice did we get solid new information about the subject, notably at Tsinghua University), followed by a few words on the present functioning of the institution and a summary of its evolution against the country's political development. We would then tour the place, often talking with people working at their desks or behind their machines. Then back to the meeting room for a question-answer period where a good deal of information would be obtained. I found, however, some of the most pertinent and direct answers to my questions were obtained when asked individually of members of the hosting party or of other employees while touring the premises. The question-answer period would end with a word of thanks from Professor Bedeski and we would rush to the next activity on our agenda.

To relieve us from mental saturation, activities such as sightseeing trips, visits to museums and artistic performances were included on the agenda. From these we were able to observe China's socialist interpretation of her history and to see socialist arts performed. When in Peking, we went on the immemorial tours of the Great Wall, the Summer Palace, the Palace Museum and the Ming Tombs. We also visited the Great Hall of the People, where many a congress of the Communist Party of China and the National People's Congress is held. We sat on the delegates' benches in this enormous meeting auditorium

which can accomodate 10,000 people.

In Sian, ancient capital of China, we learned about the way of life and the organization of the 6,000 year old Banpo Village's matriarchal society while touring the excavation site of the village and the adjoining museum. At the Huaching hot spring, outside the city, we retraced the steps of Chiang Kai-shek as he fled up the rocky hill where he was later captured, in what is known as the "Sian Incident" (12 December 1936). We walked up the tomb of the Emperor Chin Shih Huang, the first monarch to unify China, and Sun Yat Sen's Mausoleum, who toppled the last dynasty in China. Visits to museums including the Shensi Provincial Museum famous for its Forest of Tablets, and the Taiping Museum, its exhibition wholly dedicated to the mid-nineteenth century peasant rebellion, considered by many a forerunner of the Communist-led one, brought to us glimpses of China's rich and long past. We sampled a taste of contemporary art in China today by attending performances of music and dance by professionals and young amateur artists. We saw two Modern Revolutionary Peking Operas ("Fighting on the Plain" and "White-Haired Girl", an opera version of the famous ballet), and visited exhibitions of paintings and photography (including the Hu County Exhibition, in Shensi Province, famous for its work by "peasant-artists").

We learned a lot from all these visits and also from observations made walking in the streets or travelling in the countryside. However, while on the tour hundreds of questions flashed through my mind, for which it was impossible then to get a satisfactory answer. I came away from China with more questions on my mind than when I went in. A good reason for another trip!

By far the major limitations, I found, were of a temporal and spatial nature. Three weeks in China, covering five urban areas and one county, are just not enough for a student of China. Fortunately, however, Mrs. Fang Tsui, our head guide, made us understand that she was aware that Brenda and I were attached to the group at the request of the Chinese Embassy in Ottawa, and that we may have interests other than those covered by the group's itinerary. In this case, she said, she would be open to our requests to visit specific places, and would do her best to satisfy them. We gladly accepted Mrs Fang's offer and made good use of it. Finally, I found I had to exercise self-control so as not to appropriate too many resources away from the group and give additional work to our guides.

Among the many general impressions I am left with from my visit to China, two, I believe, are worth mentioning here. The first, among the people themselves, one could sense a feeling of pride in what their country has achieved, and of identification with what it has become. No matter that they may be one of many millions of China's workers, students, peasants, housewives, they feel secure, and are concerned about their country's development and want to be part of it. This came through again and again when talking to people in the streets, in the parks, in the factories, or on the communes. It brings to mind the old worker at the Peking Arts and Handicrafts Factory. He was totally absorbed in polishing a piece of rose quartz when I spotted him from among twenty or so other workers, skillfully working the pieces of jade and quartz. I went over and watched him for a while. When he felt my presence, I opened up a conversation with him in his native tongue, which elicited a broad toothless smile as a sign of his surprise and excitement! I learned that he had been working in this craft for over forty years, beginning as an apprentice, then, after Liberation in 1949, as a craftsman in a small handicraft cooperative, and finally as a worker in this state-owned factory, established in 1960 when a number of cooperatives were merged together. When he told me he was sixty six years old, I asked him why he had not yet retired, as male workers at this factory can retire at sixty. Once more he displayed his broad toothless smile and said: "I could have retired. All my children are now married and working. The retirement pension, which amounts to seventy percent of my full salary, would be more than enough for me to live on. But I am in good health and feel physically strong. As long as I can participate in the socialist construction of the motherland, I will do so."

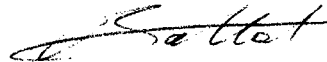
As for my second impression. Being a student of management and organization studies, the little I observed on the trip made me even more aware of the considerable skills displayed in China in these areas. This impression, in a way, is nothing new, as it has often been expressed in previous writings particularly on the Chinese bureaucracy and organization. Most of these writings, however, dealt with the subject at the macro-level, with little attention being paid to the micro-level. For me, the latter was most interesting to observe, as it is of crucial significance to the daily life of the Chinese citizen. A Chinese person, typically belongs to, and participates

in, more organizations than his north-American counterpart. Whether in the countryside or in urban areas, at work, in the residence or at school, for young or adult people, almost every community concern - health services, family planning, policing and defence, education, assignment and maintenance of housing, employment, and so on - is incorporated into an organizational structure. While some deplore these organizations as being instruments of social control, others praise them for the services they render. In the eyes of the few Chinese people with whom I broached the subject, these "mass organizations" would rather fit in with the latter view, without, however, discounting the social control - of "bad elements" - and the educational roles of some of them. They seemed to me quite hierarchical, but at the same time deeply rooted within the people. Volunteers from the community work at the lowest two or three levels of the hierarchy while the upper echelons are manned by cadres. For them to function adequately, a sense of motivation and a desire to participate on the part of the members must be present. This seems to be the case and fits in with my first impression.

Besides what I learned about the Chinese society and the many impressions I brought back, hundreds of images full of life and vitality are engraved in my mind. That of two teen-aged boys cooling themselves off by diving in and out of a pond outside Sian, in their birthday suits. The boys and girls in the kindergarten, their cheeks blushing with rouge, performing in our honor, songs and dances denouncing the arch capitalist roader Teng Hsiao-ping. The woman in her late sixties, her face creased with wrinkles, a deep look in her eyes, pushing her two grand-children in a pram made of bamboo through Sun Yat Sen Park in Peking. Or the lines of heavily laden carts pulled by donkeys, mules, camels and oxen, inching their way along the road outside Shihchiachuang while their drivers dozed off behind. The Tsinghua University student with such a delicate and intellectual face, clad in a neat white shirt and blue pants, working in the physics laboratory on laser-produced holograms; and the vivacious eighteen year old woman, youngest member of the Hsiao Chia Ying Production Brigade's Revolutionary Committee, giving us a tour of the brigade's workshop and flour mill. The severe looking face of the cadre

sitting in the backseat of a "Shanghai" zooming down Chang An Boulevard. The wrinkled, sun-burned face, smiling eyes and calloused hands of the head of the Hsiao Chia Ying Production Brigade's Revolutionary Committee. Or the seventy two year old bowlegged woman, in her Sunday best, standing at the top of Sun Yat Sen's Mausoleum, referring to the 1,200 steps she had just walked up as "good exercise."

Sincerely yours



Joseph Y. Battat

Received in New York on December 1, 1976