

CHGO-44
Conversations with Communist
Chinese Cadres

27 Lugard Road,
The Peak,
Hong Kong.

January 12, 1965.

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

Dear Mr. Nolte,

One of the most intriguing aspects of my trip to China, and at the same time one of the most difficult to convey convincingly in a letter, were my conversations with Communist cadres. Nearly all of these were officials of the China International Travel Service. Our conversations frequently turned to politics and gradually they assumed an importance to me out of all proportion to their real significance. It seemed vitally important that I present the "case for the West," try to understand the Chinese view on world problems, and at the same time try to get "one-up".

After the various discussions I recorded our conversations in my notes, but must admit to certain misgivings about committing them to paper in a letter. In retrospect they appear banal and naive. But since they are, to me, very much a part of my month in China I reproduce a selection of them here. I would stress that these conversations were with officials. I never discussed politics in such a manner with chance acquaintances, in fact I only retaliated after the cadres had fired the first political salvos.

On the contradiction of the gardens in Soochow: Soochow is noted for its Ming Dynasty gardens. They are small, similar in some respects to Japanese gardens, although lacking the same quality of serene simplicity. Nevertheless they are remarkable achievements of design and construction. In Soochow I had as my companion a young China International Travel Service man who was overly nice and dedicated, and at times I found him a little trying. After he had shown me around about half-a-dozen of the gardens and had related the history of every rock and tree and repeatedly brought in the politics of how "only under the present Government had the gardens been restored" etc., etc., I decided to bait him.

I said, "Mr. Suen, you and your Government are obviously proud of this garden, but there is a garden here only because of a political system which you despise. How can you in clear conscience show it off with pride?" "Because," replied Mr. Suen, "the garden is the product of the skill of the workers, and we come here to admire their achievement in building this beautiful garden." "Yes," I said, "but the workers are only a part of the story. There are a number of other factors. First, there is the political and social system which enabled a few men to be rich and the masses to be poor. Second there is the decision on the part of the rich man that he would like

to spend his money on a garden. Thirdly, there is the skill and craft of the designers, and only fourthly there is the skill of the workers. All are relevant and must be considered together. The same is true of the Forbidden City in Peking. It is a contradiction of your system that allows you to display with pride something which was built in a feudal society."

"But we come here to admire the skill of the workers," came the reply. I gave up.

On girls: China is surely one of the most puritanical states the world has ever known, and I was always on the lookout for a sign of "normal" attitudes of boys to girls and vice versa. In Nanking I had as my interpreter a particularly likeable man of about 28 years of age. I said I was going on to Soochow and asked whether the saying that Soochow girls are the prettiest in China is true. He admitted that Soochow girls are pretty and said it is the climate which gives them a particularly pleasing complexion. The following day we visited the Nanking Museum together. Our guide was a really beautiful girl, one of the prettiest I have ever seen. After we left the Museum I said to the interpreter, "I think perhaps Nanking girls are the prettiest in China." He slapped me on the back, laughed and said, "But she's from Soochow!"

A few days later I was in Soochow and tried out the same lead with the Soochow guide. However, all I got from him was that beauty was only skin deep and that it was the inner (presumably political) thoughts which counted. I tried hard to prove my point that some girls were more pleasing on the eye than others, regardless of innerself, but he was not to be moved, and we ended in another deadlock.

On the Negro problem in America: I frequently tried to find out how much the Chinese knew about the outside world. It was shockingly little and badly distorted. They knew some facts which they considered to be "the truth" and would always say "but we know the facts and the facts cannot lie." Nowhere was the Chinese misconception of "the truth" more apparent than in their knowledge of the Negro problem. Not a single person I talked to knew of the distinction between States' rights and Federal rights. None knew that the Federal Government had used troops to enforce the integration ruling. When I pointed out the distinction between State and Federal action, the reply was that in any country it must be the central government which, in the final count, should be held responsible for the actions of its people.

I had the longest session on this topic with my Hangchow interpreter. He clearly did not know whether to believe me but finally said, "But we know the truth. Dr. Williams, the beloved leader of the American Negroes, has been to Peking and talked with Chairman Mao, he has told us the truth." I replied, "I happen to have heard of Dr. Williams from reading the Chinese press, but I am quite certain that the majority of Americans have not heard his name. To call him the leader of the Negroes is not correct."

On America: Some of the deepest discussions, and certainly the most lengthy, were with Mr. Wang, the Secretary of the China International

Travel Service in Shanghai. He came with me on all my visits in Shanghai, and during a long tea break during our visit to the Industrial Exhibition in the huge Sino-Soviet Friendship Pavilion, we discussed America. Also taking part in the conversation was the director of the exhibition.

I forget how the conversation started but the Chinese complained that the American press had not reported the truth about China. I agreed that there were well authenticated cases of misreporting in the American press, however I felt the situation had improved in recent months. But equally true, I said, is the fact that the Chinese people have not been told the truth about America. "Our Government always tells the truth about America, it discloses their evil schemes, it is the truth," said Mr. Wang. I replied, "Mr. Wang, the truth encompasses a whole spectrum of facts. You cannot pick out a few isolated ones from this spectrum and call them the truth. The Americans are not basically evil or bad as your government and press make out. Nor I believe, are the Chinese or conditions in China as bad as much of the American press makes out. But you must remember that it was possible for Felix Greene to publish a book in America which exposed the misreporting of China in America. That the American Government should allow such a book to be published is indicative of the freedoms which exist in America about which your people are not told."

"Our Government also publishes reports from overseas which are not favourable to the Chinese people. For example, the Russian reports were published in full, and so were Kennedy's and Rusk's speeches, even when they were not favourable to China," said Mr. Wang.

I replied, "But why then have I found it impossible to buy Western magazines and newspapers in China, why do your bookstores only carry English language translations of Chinese books, why in fact have I been unable to find a single book or magazine in which there is a word of criticism about China?"

"There are some places where you can buy foreign papers, but because we are a poor country and lack foreign exchange, I admit that there are not many." Mr. Wang then went on to talk more about America. He said, "We realize that the actions of the American Government are not representative of the wishes of the American people. We have a great feeling of affection for the American people. We Chinese have demonstrated we do not want Chiang Kai-shek, yet the Americans persist in supporting him. They continually send their planes over our territory and have military bases ringing our country. How can we believe other than that they have an aggressive policy toward us. We exist. You can see for yourself. No matter what America does about recognition, we will continue to exist. We are still very backward and have a long way to go to catch up with international standards, but we intend to do so."

The dialogue continued. I said that America considered

her bases necessary because she believed China had aggressive policies. In fact neither side trusts the other. Mr. Wang disclaimed any aggressive policies for China, which led us into discussions on India and Korea. Mr. Wang of course, merely repeated the official Communist Party cliches and opinions, but it was instructive to hear these first hand.

On Communism and Freedom: On the drive to and from the Tang Wan Commune on the outskirts of Shanghai I had another long discussion with Mr. Wang on Communism. I tackled him about the lack of freedom in China today. He said, "It is true that a few people have less freedom but the vast majority have more freedom than they had ever known in the old society -- which is better? Also we have done away with many evil things which plagued old China. For example, we have done away with gambling and prostitution." I agreed that in principle gambling and prostitution were bad, particularly when carried to excess. "But," I said, "I believe that it is up to the individual to set his own moral standards. The society in which its members, of their own free will, do not gamble or use prostitutes will be the best. Neither your society nor mine has yet reached that ideal."

On Revisionism: All the interpreters were scornful of Russia for her "revisionism". "They are no longer Marxist-Leninists" I was told by one interpreter. "They are just moving with the times," I replied. "You are still living in the Nineteenth Century and believe that capitalism is still the same today as it was then. In fact it has changed a great deal. Many of the bad features have gone. It is a serious defect that so few Chinese know the outside world, and it results in your being too dogmatic."

On International Communism: In the final taxi ride in Shanghai, from the hotel to the station, I asked Mr. Wang to explain China's stand on international communism. "We are led to believe," I said, "that China considers a third world war inevitable. Is this true? China also claims she supports all those movements in foreign countries which are for the liberation of "the people". Does this mean China would actively support say a Canadian communist party which was dedicated to overthrow the Canadian Government, by force if necessary?"

It was unfortunate that I had left this question until so late, there was only time for a brief reply. He said, "China considers that it is inevitable that all countries will ultimately be communist. But just when and how that happens is the internal affair of each country. We will however, give moral support to the liberation movement in all countries, particularly those oppressed by imperialism. We do not consider a third world war inevitable, but are prepared to fight one if necessary to oppose imperialist aggression."

These are samples from a month of similar conversations. In many ways it was a mistake to have argued. I knew I would only run into brick walls. On the other hand the conversations did help me to understand the Chinese viewpoint a little better, and they certainly helped to clarify my own ideas on a variety of subjects. For these reasons they were worthwhile.

Yours sincerely,



C.H.G. Oldham.

P.S. Mr. Wang managed to fire the final political salvo of our exchanges. After returning to Hong Kong I sent him some photographs that I had taken on visits to communes and schools in Shanghai. I also enclosed a letter and other photographs for him to forward to the Chinese family that I visited in Shanghai. (They were the relatives of a friend in Hong Kong who had helped me with my Chinese studies. The visit was made at the invitation of the family and with the cognizance of China International Travel Service, but without an interpreter.) I recently received the reply reproduced on the following page.

Received in New York January 15, 1965.



南京东路20号
20, Nanking Road (East)

中國國際旅行社上海分社

CHINA INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL SERVICE

SHANGHAI BRANCH

电报挂号
Cables: LUXINGSHE Shanghai

Dec. 21, 1964

Dear Mr. Oldham

I have received your letter and am thankful for your writing to me.

I have also passed on the letter and photographs which you have requested. Since I was away accompanying several foreign friends to some other cities in the last few days and only read your letter after I returned to Shanghai, therefore I delayed in transmitting them. I hope you will pardon me.

1964 is coming soon to end. During this year, under the correct leadership of our government, the Chinese people have gained tremendous achievements in industrial and agricultural production, in cultural and educational fields and in scientific research work etc.. At present, the people of our country, uniting together, and with a buoyant spirit, are striving for a new victory in 1965 with greater effort and perseverance.

I wish you good health in the coming year and good luck to your family.

Yours Chinese friend,

S. W. Wong.