

Evaluation of the China Seminar

The three weeks educational tour of China was a most valuable learning experience. My knowledge of Chinese history and society prior to making preparations for the trip was most limited. Briefings and readings provided a base upon which experience and observation could be built. The briefing session conducted by Hao Jia (George Washington University) and Junjiu Tan (Wuhan University) were insightful and proved to be quite accurate. Hao Jia spoke movingly of the Cultural Revolution and the negative aspects of the current government of PRC. Junjiu Tan fully described the governmental organization and one could ascertain by interpolation unspoken criticism. The chap who briefed the group on tourism was surprisingly ill-informed. We were fortunate to have had Mr. Li and not Yingyi Tanga as our guide in China.

The trip was well planned by Mr. Li, section chief, Foreign Affairs Office from Hebei province, and by Uliana Gabara who worked with the Chinese Educational Exchange in New York. This was not a tourist trip, but a demanding educational "grand tour" of China. We visited six universities (including one medical school), and heard lectures in all of them except the Shandong Teachers College.

I was not impressed by most of the lecturers we heard or by the institutions of higher education in China generally. The professor at Suzhou was beyond his prime. Most of the rest were unimpressive, and appeared to be non-expert in their fields. From the interesting presentation on Chinese law at Shandong University, I learned that the "will of the people" is perfectly expressed by "the Party".

My contact with Chinese professors left me with an uneasy feeling. Most had been negatively affected by the Cultural Revolution; they had been deprived of years of scholarly

work, and they had lost independence, inspiration, and drive. They were a depressed, defeated, ill-paid lot -- at or near the bottom of the economic scale in China. One exception was the associate professor of American literature at Qufu University. We visited with him and his wife in his 4th floor apartment. He was intellectually alive, excited about scholarship and teaching and well travelled. However, other visits with Chinese professors made by my colleagues proved to be disappointing.

The trip included extensive travel in China by train, bus, and plane. Consequently we saw different areas and people. Yunan Province is strikingly different from Guangzhou. The visits to the smaller cities (Qufu and Suzhou) provided both contrast and some relief from a busy schedule. I believe that we stayed too long in Kunming. A two or three day visit to Kunming and especially travel in Yunan province would be constructive. We saw a different China — topographically and ethnically. But, the normal school (Kunming College) was little better than a weak junior college. The food was not up to standard and the hospitality was (for me) obtrusive.

I never imagined that I would see medieval agriculture in practice. Chinese agrarian labour remains manual — peasant families working together in the fields. Little machinery is available and, if it were, I expect the result would be massive unemployment. Farmers (peasants) we were told generally receive more income than teachers or physicians. Factory workers are also relatively well paid.

Prior to the China trip I read in The Economist that 90% of the Chinese people had color TV sets, an unbelievable assertion that is accurate. Chinese stores and shops are filled with consumer goods at cheap prices. TV sets, however, are expensive starting at 2000 yuan

or about \$400 U.S. Yet, peasant homes and huts (brick built) have electricity (if not plumbing) and most peasants have TV's. Perhaps for the average Chinese the purchase of TV is similar to the purchase of a car by an American. TV provides a means for education, entertainment, and propaganda.

We visited a peasant village in Yunan province, a few miles from Kunming. I was struck by the prosperity both of the farmers and factory workers living there. We were shown a peasant/factory worker home. By comparison to the apartment of the University professor in Qufu, the peasant home was large, well furnished, and well designed. Whereas the professor used an old bicycle for transportation, the farmer had a couple of bicycles and a large motorcycle! This again underlined the relative importance of the teacher and the farmer.

For me a highlight of the trip was a full-morning visit to a model primary school in Suzhou. The school had modern teaching tools (including typewriters and computers), a fine science lab, and impressive fine arts displayed. We visited second and third grade classes. The children appeared to be bright, alert, and concentrating on their studies. Each class had 48 students, presided over by an exciting young instructor.

As a consequence of the travel I learned something about Chinese music, medicine, law, society and culture. I also learned about and observed Chinese people. Associating with colleagues and eating three meals with them every day was an experience. Observing table manners (without commenting) was interesting. Who would spin the lazy susan, where would it stop, and how much of the really good food would be left — these were light questions, amusingly considered, and never answered.

Chinese students begin to study English language in the fourth grade. Most Chinese with whom I spoke knew something about American culture and current U.S. politics. They knew more about my society than I knew (prior to the seminar) about theirs. That fact by itself bespeaks the significance of the China seminar. For me it was an exciting learning experience, and I am imparting some of the results to my humanities class.