

1994

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Recommended Citation

Leppel, Karen (1994) "A Visit to China: Observations of a Developing Country," *Visions in Leisure and Business*: Vol. 12 : No. 4 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/visions/vol12/iss4/3>

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A VISIT TO CHINA
OBSERVATIONS OF A DEVELOPING COUNTRY

BY

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ABSTRACT

The author travelled to the People's Republic of China with a delegation of economists. This paper contains observations made during professional discussions as well as more general thoughts about the people and the sights of China.

Appreciation is expressed to Dennis Yu for his comments on the manuscript. This paper is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Ruth Leppel, who died August 4, 1990. Among other things, she taught me the value of good writing.

INTRODUCTION

China is a country of contrast and change. On a three-week trip with a delegation of economists, I had the opportunity to observe this ancient, but changing civilization. The trip was arranged as part of the Citizen Ambassador Program, by People to People International, an organization dedicated to the promotion of cultural exchange. The delegation consisted of approximately fifty people, including about ten guests (primarily spouses). Most of the remainder were

academic economists. The vast majority of the delegation was American, but there were also a few members from Australia, Austria, Canada, and Germany.

We visited four Chinese cities. The first was Beijing, the capital, and of great historical interest. Second was Dalian, one of China's best northern ports. Chongqing, in the south, with its hot climate is appropriately nicknamed the furnace of the Yangtse. Lastly, was Shenzhen which has benefited economically from its proximity to Hong Kong. Shenzhen was officially designated a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in 1979 and was one of the first. Through preferential treatment, these zones encourage foreign investment.

Like firms in other developing countries, Chinese firms often can not start production simply by buying machinery. They need advice on appropriate plant scale, on foreign markets for potential exports, on factory location and design, on installation and service of machinery, on organization of work flow, and on quality control. Foreign industrial managers are frequently difficult to hire because qualified personnel are often attached to other firms.

Consequently, the skills and knowledge can usually only be acquired by encouraging a foreign firm to participate in a joint venture in China. Thus, through its Special Economic Zones, China hopes to import advanced technology and acquire scientific techniques and management skills, which will enable the country to speed up its economic development. (For further discussion of problems and policy in developing countries, see (4.)

While the Chinese are a friendly people, and we had interpreters, the language and cultural barriers still provided obstacles to communication, particularly in our professional exchanges. The interpreters had a general knowledge of the English language, but they were often not familiar with the concepts and terminology of the specific fields with which we were dealing. As a consequence, we were frequently aware that something was getting lost in the translations. Nonetheless, most of the delegation found the visit exciting, and enlightening. Many of us kept journals recording both the professional proceedings and the sightseeing excursions. What follows is based on my recorded observations and subsequent ruminations. It should be noted that three weeks is not a very long visit for such a large country. With more time, my perceptions might have been more attuned to China's finer distinctions.

COMMUNICATION

As Americans living in an enormous, powerful country, where almost everyone speaks the same language, we become accustomed to opening our mouths and being easily understood. Traveling to an even larger country where the majority of

the people have no knowledge of the English language is an eye-opening experience. Communication is often reduced to pointing and gesturing. While staying in Beijing, I was gradually becoming accustomed to this cumbersome communication. On one occasion, the delegation was visiting the Great Wall, and I had found some T-shirts that I wanted to purchase. I was preparing myself for the complicated hand-waving necessary to communicate designs, sizes, and prices. At that moment, the Chinese woman behind the counter said clearly in English, "may I help you?" My surprise and relief were enormous; the transaction was going to be a simple one. My own reaction to such a small matter increased my awareness of our dependence on language for communication.

While the United States has a multi-ethnic population, China has only recently been open to visitors from the west. Consequently, Caucasians are fairly rare in China. Since we don't view the Chinese as strange, it feels peculiar when they view us so. Furthermore, in the United States, it is considered impolite to stare. Thus, even when we see someone we think is odd, the looks are brief and surreptitious. In China, however, there is no such cultural taboo. On one particular, but by no means atypical, occasion a small sub-group of the delegation went on a shopping expedition in Chongqing. We stopped at a little store, to make several purchases. On this outing, we had one of our Chinese-speaking couriers with us who translated our various requests to the shopkeeper. We were standing by the counter at the front of the shop for probably about a half an hour. A sizable group of Chinese had accumulated behind us to watch, and they remained for the entire duration of the transactions. They stood there well after one of the delegates who

was not purchasing anything at the store had become bored waiting for us.

This behavior is not limited to the city streets. On another occasion, we were staying at a hotel in Shenzhen's Special Economic Zone. One would expect that the number of Caucasians seen in the zone would be greater than that in many other parts of China, since foreign investment is being actively courted in these zones. Furthermore, hotels are likely to attract a more diverse population. Nevertheless, after dining one day, my roommate and I were waiting for the elevator, when she remarked that we were being watched by a table of Chinese. I turned around and, of course, she was right. I smiled and waved, and the Chinese responded similarly. In the United States, where one is not supposed to stare, my actions would have caused embarrassment for the people caught staring. In China, our watchers were amused and delighted.

The Chinese are both curious and friendly regarding Caucasian visitors. English is increasingly becoming a part of the curriculum in the schools, and the Chinese are thrilled to have a chance to try out their English. They would sometimes approach us on the streets or in the shops to talk to us. They wanted to know where we were from, what we had seen in their country and how long we were planning to stay.

TRANSPORTATION

The streets of China's cities are very clean. Relatively small amounts of litter are found, especially compared with cities in the United States. Streetsweepers are a common sight, particularly in Beijing.

Transportation in China varies somewhat from city to city. Very few people in China own private automobiles. In Beijing, the streets are filled with small trucks, many buses, and an enormous number of bicycles. The buses are always crowded. Since they carry so many people, they are large and consist of two parts. The front part looks much like most U.S. buses. The rear part, however, is more like a trailer; it has only two wheels and its sides are attached to the sides of the front section by accordion-like connectors that allow for flexibility in turning corners.

Bicycles provide a major source of transportation for a great many of Beijing's people. Most of the bicycles are two-wheeled, one-speed bikes with hand brakes. They are almost exclusively touring bikes, not racing bikes, and are usually equipped with baskets and racks for carrying things. There are also many old, adult-sized, three-wheeled cycles which are used for carrying surprisingly bulky and heavy loads. The air in Beijing is fairly smoggy and often women cyclists and children transported on their parents' bikes are seen with their faces wrapped in sheer scarves. The streets were constructed with bicycles in mind and have specific, well-labeled bicycle sections which are separated from the faster traffic by medial strips. A visiting professor at Beijing's University of International Business and Economics informed me that the average biking distance to work in Beijing was 10 kilometers (6 miles). Looking at all those bicycles, I thought how incredibly congested and polluted Beijing would be if all those cyclists were in cars. An appropriate compromise might be a small, perhaps electric car, useful for moderate distances and moderate speeds.

Bicycles were also frequently seen in Dalian and Shenzhen, but the numbers did not compare with Beijing. It was rainy when we were in Shenzhen and the people simply wore rain panchos or rode with one hand on the handlebar and one hand holding an umbrella. In Chongqing, however, bicycles were rarely seen. The streets are far too steep for bicycles. Instead, the people pulled heavy cartloads on foot, rickshaw style. We were all sadly impressed by how hard life is for many in Chongqing, where people often serve as their own beasts of burden.

THE CUISINE

During our visit to China, we were served huge quantities of food. Lunches and dinners consisted of approximately ten courses and lasted about two hours. Some of the food was familiar to us, from Chinese restaurants in the U.S. In particular, the Beijing duck (usually called Peking duck in America) was delicious. Also the food we had in Guangdong province was quite similar to the Cantonese food eaten in the U.S.

Much of the food in China, however, is not widely found in Chinese-American restaurants. Over the course of their long history, the Chinese have experienced many rough periods and have developed methods of cooking almost everything. Some of these items, many of which come from the sea, are not generally palatable to American tastes. Many members of our delegation found some of these foods too slimy (for example, the sea cucumber) or too rubbery (such as the jellyfish). The food of Sichuan province is even spicier than a lot of the dishes served in Szechuan restaurants in the United States. Furthermore, we received

little chicken in China. It generally takes about twice as much feed to bring a chicken to maturity as in the U.S. Consequently, chicken is fairly expensive in China.

While the food in China varies from province to province, particularly in its spiciness, our delegation detected a certain basic sameness to the food after three weeks. This would probably be true in almost any country. A rare exception is the United States. The U.S. has often been called an ethnic "Melting Pot;" more consistent with the notion of a salad bowl, however, the ethnic groups have remained distinctly visible. In large American cities, in a single week, one could dine on Mexican, Italian, and Chinese food, as well as many others. As a result many Americans have become accustomed to great variety in cuisine.

For most of our meals, the delegation dined in our hotels. For a few meals, though, we ate in restaurants. One particularly memorable restaurant was supposedly one of the best in Chongqing. It was lunch and the food was quite tasty. However, the surroundings were lacking. The napkins were stained, the glasses spotted, and the chopsticks not very clean.

All of our meals had been arranged in advance, and it was with considerable dismay that we discovered that dinner the next day was to be at the same restaurant. It was to be a "Hot Pot" dinner, very similar to fondue-style. There was a large heated pot with broth in the middle of the table, and the soon-to-be-cooked items surrounded the pot. Quite a few people decided to skip the meal and eat in the western-style coffeehouse in the hotel. I was curious, however, and decided to join most of the delegation for the hot pot dinner. The restaurant was no

cleaner than it had been the day before. Furthermore, the broth in the pot bore a remarkable resemblance to sludge. The food awaiting cooking included brains and a number of other dishes that looked particularly unappetizing in their uncooked state. I started eating the vegetables that were served as appetizers. Then as the pots were being prepared, the fire under one of them got a little out of hand. The workers at the restaurant were quite calm as they proceeded to extinguish the fire by throwing on the ever present hand-washing hot towels (actually washcloths). That took care of the fire without any permanent damage to anything but the cloths.

MEETINGS AND CONVERSATIONS

During one of our professional sessions, I had a brief discussion with a professor who was currently teaching at a university in Shenzhen, and who had previously taught in Shanghai. I was curious about whether the students at the two institutions differed and if so, how. Shenzhen, as a Special Economic Zone has been undergoing dramatic change and development. The number of jobs in the area is therefore expanding far more rapidly than in the rest of China. This difference is reflected in the types of students that are attracted to the university in Shenzhen. The professor told me that the Shenzhen students are primarily interested in applications rather than theory and are mostly concerned with making money. The students in Shanghai had greater interest in theory. I have observed a related pattern among students in U.S. institutions. Business colleges have expanded in recent years as job openings have developed in that field. The students who major in business often do so because

they expect that it will guarantee them a job after graduation. They have little interest in theory and are concerned only with things that they think will be directly applicable to their job. The students in fields such as the humanities are more likely to choose their majors because they enjoy the subject matter.

During another professional session, I met with members of Chongqing's birth control commission. I had heard about China's one-child program, and was curious about its implementation. In the recent past, two children per couple has been the norm; because of China's huge population problems, the government has been encouraging families to have only one child. Traditionally, in rural areas of China, when a woman married, she joined the household of her husband and thus contributed to that farm's production. The value of a female offspring was therefore less than the value of a male offspring. Consequently, families were anxious to have male children, especially when the number of children they were permitted was limited. The disastrous result as an increase in the incidence of female infanticide. Recently, however, the tradition has changed. When children grow up and marry, they now join whichever household has the greater need for additional members. This change was no doubt assisted by the Marriage Laws of 1950 and 1980. The Marriage Law of 1950 legally established a marriage system based on the free choice of partners, monogamy, and equal rights for men and women. The law prohibited concubinage, child betrothal, and infanticide. The Marriage Law of 1980 adds the stipulation that a husband may become a member of his wife's family and holds daughters, as well as sons, responsible for supporting their parents in old age. (For

more information on the marriage laws and the status of women in China, see (1, p. 224).)

In the conversation with the birth control commission, I became aware that there is much greater flexibility in China's population policy than I had thought. In rural areas and regions with large concentrations of minority groups, the government has been far less strict in the implementation of the policy. Rural families who are having two children are encouraged, however, to space them widely. The increased flexibility was initiated by the Party Central Committee's Document 7, which was issued in 1984. The document instructed family planning workers to improve relations between the Party and the people, to avoid coercion, relying instead on education and propaganda, and to allow two children in certain situations. (For a list of regulations on second children, see (2, pp. 496-497).)

During the next several decades, the stringency with which population policy is implemented is expected to vary. During periods in which a large proportion of the population is in its child-bearing years, the policy will be stricter. When the child-bearing cohort is smaller, the policy will be more lenient. Although China is trying to reduce its population, assistance is available for couples who have difficulty bearing children. This assistance includes the use of advanced technology such as artificial insemination.

A conversation with one of our Chinese couriers, who has been living in the U.S. for six years, revealed two of the differences in life styles between China and the U.S. They appear to be two sides of the same coin and probably due to the difference in population

size. First, having only one fourth as many people as China, the U.S. is more spacious, allowing more privacy.

Second, people in the U. S., not wanting to impose on others, seem more distant. Consequently, life in the U.S. can be lonelier than life in China.

Another difference between the U.S. and China is the male/female occupational distribution. For example, in China, a much higher proportion of physicians are women. In Dalian, where we visited a hospital, we were given a tour of the premises by the director who was a woman. In some ways, however, the occupational distribution by gender is quite similar. The number of women in positions of political power in China is very small¹, not unlike the situation in the United States. Also like the U. S., in the field of education, most of the young children are taught by women, while most of the college instructors are men.

CHINA'S POTENTIAL

During our professional meetings, we were continually reminded of how anxious China is to promote trade. The state is especially interested in bringing foreign currency into China. Joint ventures between Chinese and foreign companies are heartily encouraged. Special preference is granted to foreign enterprises whose products are mainly to be exported from China.

As the Chinese strive to improve their technology and increase their output, however, they need to keep in mind two ideas. First, they have a large population that can be well employed in a labor-intensive technology. Thus, they should seek to import or develop techniques that

are less capital-intensive than the technologies of most of the countries that they are trying to emulate.

Second, it is not sufficient to consider what items are in high demand around the world, when the Chinese choose their mix of products. They must also take into account their available resources. In their fervor to increase exports, it is important that they not neglect their areas of comparative advantage. The Chinese should determine the goods for which their opportunity cost of production is low and then concentrate on the manufacture and export of those goods.

As one of my colleagues² pointed out, many international markets are already crowded, and the Chinese may find it difficult to compete. He suggested that tourism can generate considerable income in foreign currency in a manner that is potentially well-suited to China. China has a great deal to offer foreign visitors.

The attractiveness of China to Westerners, would be substantially enhanced by improvements in the sanitation conditions in restrooms and restaurants. The public restrooms compare abysmally with those in the United States. Western-style toilets are not usually provided. Instead, there are shallow porcelain basins, the tops of which are just a few inches above the ground. Toilet paper is generally unavailable. Western tourists often find these conditions unacceptable.

Beijing, China's capital city, already attracts many Chinese visitors, and also has great potential for foreign tourism. The Imperial Palace complex is especially noteworthy. It is an imposing and elegant architectural masterpiece, which was constructed by the third Ming Dynasty emperor during the

early fifteen century. Without special permission, no commoner or foreigner was permitted on the extensive palace grounds; the penalty for violation was death. Consequently, the palace complex is also referred to as the Forbidden City. It has only been open to the public since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 (3, pp. 258-259). For years after its opening, the grounds and buildings of the complex were easily accessed by the public. Due to the enormous volume of people who regularly visit the site, however, it has become necessary to block off many parts of the complex in order to preserve them. Many rooms are behind glass barriers, which are smudged and dirty from the crush of people. Furthermore, the lighting in the rooms is often poor and it is frequently difficult to get a clear view of the impressive interiors.

Another site which surprised and amused our delegation was found in Shenzhen: a small, imitation Disney park. Unfortunately due to inclement weather we were only able to view the exterior from the windows of our bus. Visitors who have travelled to America's Disney parks are usually impressed by how well the attractions are presented and by how well the huge numbers of people are accommodated with only moderate waiting. The Chinese need not borrow the physical appearance of the structures in the Disney parks. They might find it useful, however, to study the manner in which the attractions are made accessible to the people. China already has so much to offer; it merely needs to show it off to best advantage.

Part of the charm of traveling to China may be lost if the volume of foreign tourists increases dramatically. But China is a vast country and there can always be places off

the beaten path. Travellers searching for places uncontaminated by tourists will surely be able to find them. Whether visitors seek the popular tourist spots or the less travelled places, they will be richer for having experienced the treasures of China.

Americans living in a country only 200 years old should appreciate the culture and civilization of a country whose history antedates the Christian era. For example, one of the most remarkable sights in China is The Great Wall. Its construction dates back earlier than 200 BC and it is estimated to have once stretched more than 6200 miles (3, pp. 273-275). The wall follows the mountain ridges. In some places, the top of the wall rises and falls steeply. In others, there are sets of uneven steps to climb. Walking even a short distance on the wall is strenuous exercise.

I stumbled onto another less imposing but equally interesting sight while I was out walking in Chongqing with a few other delegates. We saw a brightly-colored archway at the end of an otherwise fairly drab street. Conversations back at the hotel later identified the structure as part of an old, but still active, Buddhist temple. The next day my roommate and I returned for a visit and were delighted. Inside were literally hundreds of wood carvings of larger-than-life monk-like figures. There were a number of recurrent symbols about which we inquired later. The carvings with several small child-like figures climbing on the main figure turned out to be fertility symbols. The common bulging foreheads represented intelligence.

China abounds with such sights as the old Buddhist temple in Chongqing. Foreign tourists will find them fascinating and worthwhile places to visit. However, when promoting tourism, political stability is crucial. After the military crackdown on the students in Beijing, the number of foreign visitors fell dramatically, and with it the flow of foreign currency into China.

Investment by foreign firms is also greatly influenced by political and economic stability. Firms with investments in Hong Kong have long been concerned about the uncertainty of the future when ownership of Hong Kong is passed to the People's Republic of China. China's growing interest in the reduction of state control over companies surely was encouraging to the firms in Hong Kong. But the military crackdown was certain to rekindle the original fears, and diminish the interest any new firms might have had in investing in Hong Kong. Furthermore, development of the remainder of China is likely to be stymied when firms considering entering into joint ventures with the Chinese instead choose a more stable environment. All future political actions taken by China's leaders must be preceded by careful deliberations regarding the effect on the economy. Otherwise, China's hopes for development are likely to be dashed again and again. It would be a great shame if a country with such an interesting and long history never gets the chance to achieve its potential.

FOOTNOTES

1. In 1982, 95 percent of heads of government agencies and 85 percent of heads of party and people's organizations were men. In rural areas, 98 percent of agricultural production leaders were men (Arnold and Zhaoxiang, 1986).
2. William Eadington of the University of Nevada at Reno.

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