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China's Socioeconomic Progress: *The Mainland Revisited Shows Evidence of Advance But Its Overpopulation Is a Big Problem*

By KARL FALK*

ABSTRACT. An invitation to lecture at a Chinese university in 1986 afforded the writer and his wife an opportunity to revisit *China*. They had been there in 1975 while the “*Cultural Revolution*” was still on and again in 1983. Their first visit covered major modern *cities* and historical *capitals*, their second more remote areas and their third the *rural areas*. They were impressed by the *economic progress*, especially in 1983–86, even in rural areas which are still lagging behind the cities. The ability of the Chinese to cope with *overpopulation* aroused their admiration but it was clear that the problem would *block or handicap* development and modernization efforts for decades to come. China's overpopulation problem is a warning to other *developing nations* which neglect *family planning*.

I

Introduction

AN ECONOMIST, trained as he is to reach conclusions on the basis of formal analysis using tested or testable methodologies, is loathe to write a humanistic report about a country he has visited, even when the visit was not the first. But I am reminded that a contemporary of Adam Smith, the agricultural economist Arthur Young, earned a well-merited place in history by showing how such accounts can add an important dimension to human knowledge. Without inviting comparison with his essays, which have stood as examples for 160 years, I would, however, like to share our observations with the interested and the curious.

An invitation to lecture at the University of Hangzhou gave us another opportunity to go to China in May and June of 1986. It enabled us to compare changes that have occurred there since our previous visits, first in 1975 while the Cultural Revolution was still going on, and again in 1983 when Tibet and the Old Silk Route and western desert were our goals.

The first visit in 1975 included the important cities of Peking, Shanghai, and Sian but also old historical capitals of central China. At that time the Chinese were anxious to have us see Yen-an where Mao started his “Long March” to

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wrest control of China from Chiang Kai Shek. Day and night they took us to see communal farms, factories, schools, nurseries, hospitals, museums, and cultural events. In 1983 we explored the remoter areas of western China in a more leisurely fashion and saw the minority nationalities—largely Moslems—who comprise less than 7 percent of the country's population of over a billion people but who inhabit 60 percent of China's total land area.

With a quarter of the world's population China is about the size of the United States. But only 10 percent of the land is arable compared to 40 percent in the U.S. Chinese forests cover only 12 percent of the land as against 36 percent in America. Even though one gets the impression of "wall to wall" people in the big coastal area cities, 80 percent of China's population lives in the country, much of which is thinly populated.

On our latest visit we were impressed by the economic progress made in China especially in the last three years. Since 1979 when some controls were eased, the rural population's standard of living has probably doubled, and once backward villages have become lively centers of local trade. Some of the women in the cities are dressed in brighter clothes than in the old uniform Mao jackets we saw in 1975. But they are still mostly drably dressed. People are eating better. In spite of the lack of tillable land, China can now feed itself modestly and even has some food and fiber for export. This concerns American farmers who used to count on exports to China and who now find them even competing in world markets. Generally, however, our trade with China in other products has increased dramatically.

II

Shift in Relations

FOR OVER TWO DECADES after the Communist Revolution and the U.S.-China confrontation in the Korean War, relations between China and the United States were virtually cut off. Since President Nixon's efforts in the early 1970s to re-establish relationships, China and the U.S. have become friends, though not necessarily allies. With the pull-out of the Soviet Union in 1959, relations between China and the Russians have been strained. The rift between these two giant powers has caused one of the biggest shifts in world strategic balance since World War II. Even though both are communist each has about a million men under arms guarding their respective borders, a sign they don't trust each other. With the death of Mao Tse Tung and the ascendancy to power of Deng Xiaoping, some doctrinaire communist policies have been modified to encourage study abroad and to seek ideas and technology from the west after two decades of strained Sino-American relations.

Visitors to China are impressed with the efforts of this nation of intelligent, hard-working people to bring their country economically into the 20th century before the 21st begins. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the Chinese are "going capitalist." The present policies could be reversed overnight. Many old line communist officials are anxious to maintain the "status quo" and their privileges. Others are uncertain which way "to jump" and survive in case policies and leadership suddenly change. Just how to evaluate this dilemma is a challenge to both Chinese and westerners. In 1985 about 200,000 American tourists visited China. They are still almost as curious about us as we are about them. Over 12,000 students from the People's Republic of China are now studying in the United States. This is also consistent with America's realization that the countries of the Pacific Rim may be growing more important and closer to us than those of Europe.

III

Fresno-China Academic Relations

AS A RESULT of closer relations and exchanges of students and faculty between California State University, Fresno, and the University of Hangzhou, located west of Shanghai and Canton, I was invited to lecture there on the subject of the American economy and capitalism. This assignment was one of the most difficult in my experience lecturing abroad in Europe and Asia since World War II. The difficulties lay in having to lecture and answer questions: (1) with the aid of an interpreter, and (2) to people who have virtually no first-hand experience in America, are unfamiliar with our history and political and economic system, and are themselves living under an entirely different economic, political, and social system.

The challenge was to explain objectively our system, discussing its strengths and weaknesses and problems without oversimplification or condescension or offending those who have been taught from a Marxist viewpoint that stresses the negative aspects of our system. (As a matter of fact, American economists themselves do not always agree on what is going on in our economy or how to describe it.)

The Chinese students nodded their heads as if to express approval as I told them: "Our system does not strive for equality of wealth and incomes but for equality of opportunity for those able and willing to work for it." I was momentarily stumped, however, when one student stated: "I am ready to believe what you say but still cannot understand how without central planning your economy isn't complete chaos." To myself I was almost ready to admit that we

sometimes seem to have such chaos, but I answered: "When you have complete central planning, if the planners make a mistake and have something manufactured that nobody wants, *everybody* pays for it. In our system if somebody makes something nobody wants to buy, he goes bankrupt and out of business, but he is the *only one* who loses." Again they nodded.

I could tell they were especially interested when I told them that our experience showed that individual motivation resulted in greater production and a higher standard of living. Increased agricultural production on private plots and private marketing of their output is living proof to them. They are gingerly trying to allow more individual initiative but they still assign everyone to his or her job and place of work. Nor can people move from place to place or from the country to the city without permission. When I asked students what they were going to do when they graduated, they said resignedly: "I will go to work wherever they assign me, and I hope that it will be something related to my training and desires." Many indicated an eagerness to continue studies in the United States though their English-speaking ability is not as good as that of students to whom I had lectured in Taiwan three years earlier.

This fall a number of Fresno State students will go to China to study as exchange students living in dormitories of the University of Hangzhou. To say that it will be a new and challenging experience for them is an understatement. Those students coming from China to Fresno will occupy a teaching assistant or semi-faculty status that will give them enough income to meet our higher costs of living, but they, too, will be in for some surprises and adjustments.

To take advantage of already being in China after lecturing in Hangzhou we traveled with our colleagues, Dr. David Clark and his wife, Margaret, also a Fresno teacher, on a tour of the Yangtse River valley and other places of interest. Dr. Clark had also lectured at the same time in Hangzhou on American higher education.

Although touring in China isn't as difficult as it used to be, and facilities are improving, the Chinese still have a long way to go to meet western standards and expectations. It is expensive because of special arrangements and personnel required. Local guides, though eager and friendly, are often inexperienced or not too proficient in English. Of course, their English is infinitely better than our Chinese!

Food for tourists is plentiful and good especially if you like Chinese food. Often much is wasted in an apparent attempt to show hospitality by overloading our menus. Sometimes you are not sure what you are eating. It is often served in an order unfamiliar to westerners; for instance, with soup being served with the dessert and rice appearing only long after the need for it has passed. Breakfast

in the major hotels offers a choice of western or Chinese food, but lunch and dinner are standard Chinese and not necessarily adapted to weather or a given situation. Incidentally, Chinese food in China is not the same as Chinese food in America. Chinese fortune cookies, for instance, were invented in San Francisco, while “chop suey” means “offal” in Chinese and isn’t ever on the menu.

Many Americans in China like to show off their prowess with chopsticks—picking up marinated button mushrooms requires some doing—but the habit of dipping with chopsticks into the main dishes on the center of the table, usually on a “Lazy Susan,” seems a sure way to pass along colds to everyone in the group. Whether this is the cause, or the dust and pollution in the air, or the habit of coughing and spitting all over—a practise fortunately diminishing with hygiene education—or merely the exhaustion from too much sightseeing, very few American tourists escape colds and respiratory troubles on their China visits.

IV

“China-Watching” A Challenge

OUR INABILITY TO SPEAK CHINESE is a considerable hindrance to ever knowing what is really going on in China. But for this reason, there are really few China “experts.” Still, even if one could speak Chinese one might still not get straight answers. Chinese tend to be indirect and avoid saying unpleasant things. They are also not very precise. I wasn’t too sure after one told me: “This is approximately exactly correct.” When I asked the guide: “Do you think it will rain today, or will we have sunshine?”, the answer was “Yes!” When quoting statistics, the beginning figures are usually “approximately” correct, but they are never sure whether it is hundreds, thousands, millions, or billions at the end.

This Confucian indirectness could slow down their drive toward “modernization” and planned economic expansion which may turn out to be more of a “Chinese fire drill” than orderly growth. The people are likeable. But one has to be very patient. Things are often done the hard way. They are hardworking and intelligent, but to a westerner some of their energy seems underutilized or misdirected, workers carrying burdens, sometimes pretty heavy, reminding one of a column of marching ants. The dilemma is that greater productivity could be achieved through mechanization, for instance, in agriculture, but then how could employment be provided for the rural population, 80 percent of the country’s total?

Even though you have to show your passport when flying from city to city within the country—and planes don’t always fly on time—one does not feel personal restrictions as when traveling in the Soviet Union. Picture taking is

freer, and Chinese are more apt to invite you into their homes, especially for tea, than would be the case in the Soviet Union.

Their housing is crowded and modest by our standards, especially in rural areas. But there is evidence of a real effort to improve and build more housing in the cities. Shelter of 400 square feet per family is their goal, about a quarter to a fifth of the average American home for a smaller family. The "extended" Chinese family, with grandparents taking care of the children while parents are both out working, is still common. Factories provide nurseries for the children without grandparents. There they are provided with excellent care.

The family is still an important Chinese social institution. Since the number of children is limited for the sake of population growth control—one child per family is the current policy compared to a limit of two per family in 1975—great care, almost overindulgence, is lavished on young children, especially boys. We encountered columns of cheerful, brightly dressed, and well-behaved schoolchildren led by their teachers heading for parks, zoos, and recreational areas.

Because space is at a premium there are not as many playgrounds as in western cities. But we were impressed, even knowing that it took care of only a fraction of the city's kids after school, with the activities at the "Children's Palace" in Shanghai. The children were not just playing, though the little ping pong players could have made us look silly, but were voluntarily practising in singing choruses, playing violins and various Chinese instruments, or working in arts and crafts with the greatest proficiency and interest. No wonder Chinese acrobatics and martial arts performances are world class. Their circuses are also world renowned, but we didn't like the way they treated their trained animals.

Chinese love flowers as reflected in their paintings and temple grounds and parks. They also like zoos. We have visited some on our trips and find the facilities and exhibits less modern than in other countries. Especially disappointing were the dark cages housing the pandas. The almost total absence of dogs and cats as pets, we learned, is largely due to lack of space and food. On our earlier visit to Tibet we saw a few dogs, but they were rarely more than one or two years old. We suspect that many had already landed in the stew pot.

V

Down the Yangtse River

THE MOST INTERESTING PART of our trip, scenically, this time was a cruise down the Yangtse river from Chungking to Wuhan. Our new ship, the *M.S. Bashan*, carried only 60 passengers while its equal-sized sister ship for the Chinese carried 500. Seeing scenery and life along the Yangtse Valley gives one a good picture of an important part of China. Since the river often runs rapidly and

levels change suddenly with rains and flooding, we found ourselves climbing innumerable stairs to reach the villages. Noting that the sky was usually overcast, we learned that this condition was largely the result of the valley's population, which is nearly equal to that of the entire United States, cooking their food three times a day over fires of soft high-sulfur content coal briquets.

Their smog is hardly the result of heavy motor traffic as in the U.S. We did see some evidence of more and better cars for government officials and government-owned trucks. But if the degree of motorization increased appreciably, it would be disastrous. Overcrowded busses and bicycles are still the important means of local transportation. As with sheep in New Zealand, bicycles almost outnumber people in large cities. The students at Hangzhou were amazed when I told them a family of four in America with a cash income under \$10,000 a year was classified as being in the poverty level, but they could hardly grasp that they probably own their own automobiles, second-hand though they might be.

The Yangtse River trip through gorges and rapids compared with a previous visit to Kweilin in beauty. Visits to museums and archeological exhibits impress Americans with the high levels of culture in China going back at least 5,000 years. This makes us pretty much "newcomers" in their eyes. On this occasion our tour took us again to Sian which had been the capital of China for a mere 2,000 years. One never ceases to be amazed at the spectacular display of hundreds of life-size terra cotta soldiers and horses recently unearthed there. They are only part of the guardians of the tomb of the emperor of the Chin dynasty who first unified China in 221 B.C.

Our visit to the Great Wall and the Ming tombs from Peking (I still find it hard to call it Beijing because they don't call it "Beijing duck" either) was another "must" for anyone wanting to have a "feel" for Chinese history. It is a unique experience though the presence of other tourists—Japanese being the other leading foreign contingent but also including many Chinese—makes these important tourist sites uncomfortably overcrowded. That, however, is part of the price you pay to satisfy your curiosity.

The valiant Chinese struggle to deal with the large numbers of people give even a foreign observer some realization of the dangers in the rest of the world with population growth outrunning the means of subsistence. The Chinese effort is often criticized as being too harsh but China does show it is possible for many people to exist together. Overcrowding, however, limits the standard of living and the quality of life, a situation that could still be avoided in other countries. Yet we cannot help but admire Chinese efforts to survive and provide the best life possible under difficult circumstances. Just as the Chinese could learn from us, at least in technology, we could learn from them, in terms of hard work, cooperation, and appreciation of our blessings.