It’s as different as night and day

Some personal impressions from within the borders of Red China

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This year’s Annual Meeting of the AWCI’s think-tank, the Continuing Study Council, was conducted in the Orient—in Bangkok, Hong Kong, and Canton (People’s Republic of China).

The Impression

Three days in a country does not make anyone an expert.

But three days does give one an opportunity to observe and observe we did.

The group arrived in Canton by “express train” from Hong Kong in the early afternoon, and the train, operated by the People’s Republic (called the PRC by English-speaking people in the Orient), gave us our very first impression of where we were going.

Our deluxe, first class car, was vintage 1920. There were, to be sure, curtains on the windows, and the seats did lean back, but luxury ended there.

The toilets were simple: Holes in the floor of the bathroom with two footpads to give you a more secure feeling while squatting. (At least there was a moderate cleanliness in these toilets—something we did not experience with public toilets anywhere else in the PRC).

The floor was not carpeted. It had linoleum and a young Chinese woman with a large mop and mop bucket swabbed the floor down at least once during our three-hour journey.

Refreshments of sorts were sold by state employees (everyone who works works for the state) who came down the aisles with their wares (fruits, cakes, and soft drinks) in large buckets.

There was a dining car and I tried to use it, but found every seat taken.
I purchased a beer and a soft drink at the car’s bar and returned to my seat, so no judgement can be given of the dining car food service or quality.

Arrival at the Kwangchow (Canton’s name in China) station was right on the dot of the time told on the ticket. Not a minute early and not a minute late.

We passed through immigration very easily with the two of us—Ray Lynch (then with Dryvit) and myself—serving as the leaders of our two groups. (The Red Chinese authorities had divided our 48 persons into two groups of 24 and we remained that way until we got back to Hong Kong.)

Our guides were two young women, Miss Wu and Miss Lin, each of whom was fluent in school book English, and each of whom was awed by their American and Canadian guests.

We were assigned to two modern buses with horns that worked beautifully. In fact, our respective drivers must have gone to horn-blowing school because they proved their horn-blowing abilities to us all too well for three solid days. The very nearness of another vehicle (whether a bicycle or another motor-driven conveyance) was all that was necessary to bring several “toots on the tooter”.

With apologies for not being able to take us to the “best” hotel, we were driven to the White Swan Hotel and when we arrived there, this was the first time we actually knew which hotel would be ours! (The PRC’s China Travel Service—for some reason unknown to me—does not reveal the name of your hotel to any traveler until you actually check in.)

Even though our hotel was not the “best,” Miss Wu assured us it was modern, clean, and first class. It all depends on whose definition you use of those words.

The hotel was different, to say the least.

We were put on the 18th and 19th floors and those on the 19th had a carpet in the elevator lobby, that being the only difference in the two floors.

Our pre-assigned rooms had no keys. A “floor girl” possessed the only key and it opened all rooms. We could lock our doors from the inside and even push the inside lock when we left the rooms, but we never did receive a room key. To gain access to our rooms, we had to find the floor girl and ask her to come unlock our doors.

Spartan is a kind word for the rooms themselves.

Each had two beds with no box springs, just a thin mattress over some boards. The bathrooms were nearly pre-historic, and, just as in Moscow, there were no shower curtains. But why worry? A floor drain by the tub took care of shower water that splashed out onto the bath floor.

The medicine cabinet was a cheap wooden affair, nailed to the wall, and we preferred to keep our cosmetics and toiletries in our respective carrying cases during our three days there.

As for ice, it was available right on each floor of the hotel, but not from a modern icemaker such as one might find in capitalist hotels: No, in the room behind the room girl’s desk stood a very old refrigerator, possibly dating to 1935 or so, and in this cake tins of water were placed to freeze. Once frozen, this ice was then
broken into chunks and sold to the guests by the glassful while it lasted.

When your floor girl was out of ice, she was out of ice, and it took hours to freeze more. However, the more enterprising among us found that by walking the stairs up or down a few floors, we could purchase ice from another floor.

This was frowned upon, but since all roundeyes look alike, they never did realize we were not from their floor.

The rooms were occupied by others beside ourselves.

Some had water bugs. Some had ants. (How do a thousand ants get to the 19th floor of a hotel, anyway?) Some had mice. In fact, Larry Reger had a packet of cheese and crackers in a shirt pocket in his suitcase and a mouse nibbled through the shirt to get at the crackers.

We were told that dining hours were as strict as train timetables, and they meant it.

If you arrived late for a meal, you got left-overs.

Meals were served in a large dining room and we were given our choice of “western” or Chinese food. The choice meant nothing since, with the exception of breakfast, every meal was Chinese.

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Employment

We were told there is no unemployment, and that may be true. Those who do work put in an official eight hours a day, but the average worker actually works about 6 hours a day. And no matter what the job, from what we learned, the wages are identical for everyone.

If you are in the fields threshing rice, you get the equivalent of $40 (U.S.) a month. And if you are the floor girl in a “modern” hotel, you also make $40 a month.

Tips are forbidden and seem to be shameful excesses of capitalism. We tried vainly to give Miss Wu a very handsome tip at the end of our stay and she refused it. When I approached her quietly and alone later with the money, she still told me No. I said, “No one will know but yourself,” and she replied, “Yes, but I would know.”

Sanitation

Don’t believe the American liberals who have been to China who tell you about this workers’ paradise where health care is so magnificent. It’s lousy.

We went to a hospital in a commune and you can bet that where visitors are taken are showcase areas.

The hospital was far from clean. It was understaffed and the equipment and supplies were ancient and minimal. No one had a sheet on his or her bed. All slept on and under blankets and I was told that the same blankets go to the next patient when the one using them is discharged (or dies).

Restrooms were filthy. The oriental style hole in the floor made us all learn “to hold it” until we got back to our hotels, and the stench in many restrooms was often overwhelming to the point of nausea. This was true at restaurants, at the commune headquarters, and anywhere where public restrooms were necessary.

Flies, as noted above, were everywhere and seemed to be a part of the scenery no matter where we went.

Human excrement is used daily to fertilize the fields and outhouses are built over ponds, streams, and small lakes and the water from these is also used in irrigation.

The Commune

The best job in China has to be that of a peasant on the tour route in a commune.

We visited the homes of a dozen peasants (row houses) in a commune and found them to be clean, neat, and orderly. These people were simply but well-dressed and had plenty of rice. Since they are on the official tour, I felt very strongly that, like Karl Marx Allee in East Berlin, this is the facade that foreigners are supposed to see.

The commune we visited emphasized the growing of fruits and featured a store where the local artists sold their not-so-good prints and hangings.

The children were as thick as the flies and all of them were friendly and highly interested in the round-eyes visiting them. We were told that we were the third group of North Americans to come there since China “opened up,” and for that reason I was sure we were as much on display to them as they were to us.

The biggest hits among our members were those with Polaroid cameras. The youngsters clamored for color photos of themselves and we could have been elected commissars had we had the time to do a little campaigning with the cameras!

(I strongly recommend taking a Polaroid with you if you ever visit Red China, and plenty of film so that you can give away the pictures you take.)

Another smart idea was that of Betty Mitchell who brought with her a packet of color post cards of her home city of Denver. These were highly valued gifts amongst not only the children, but adults also.

The People

No matter what the government, people are people, and on a one-on-one basis, they like Americans (and Canadians). We were treated royally by every person we met and we had no fear whatsoever of being on the streets at night alone or in small groups.

A few of us went into a people’s department store to purchase the Chinese style peaked caps worn by 99% of the men.

The crowds we drew were phenomenal . . . they would open up for us as we walked through the store, and close in behind as we passed by. When Cam and I stood at the counter using sign language to buy the caps, we looked up and found dozens of Chinese on either side of us up and down the counter staring and smiling.

I had learned to say “hello” in Chinese and so I called this out to this group and got an even bigger smile and a small burst of applause.
On one evening we went to a restaurant in Canton (The Kwangchow Restaurant) and, as foreigners, we went to a special dining room where we were served a ten course absolutely delicious meal.

I asked if “locals” ate there and was advised that all of the people I had seen on entering were, indeed, locals, eating out.

Opinions

One of our guides, Miss Lin, had had long philosophical conversations with Larry Reger and others before I personally got to talk with her. She was highly inquisitive and wanted to know as much as possible about America, the outside world, and our beliefs.

She knew nothing of her own country’s history prior to about 1935, and really very little before “the liberation”. (It is never called the revolution—Mao’s takeover is, to everyone, “the liberation”.)

Our embassy in Iran had just been occupied a few days before and this action was the headline in Hong Kong. Being out of Hong Kong, we were starved for news and when I asked Miss Lin about the situation in Iran, she did not even know where Iran was.

A well-educated, articulate young lady, she had never seen a newspaper and could not understand why we have more than one party nor more than one candidate in an election.

To Miss Lin, the Party’s word was that of God and when the Party gives them a list of unopposed candidates, that is all that is needed. She did not hesitate to ask questions and showed no fear of being punished for talking with me. Her loyalty to “the Party” was total and she could not picture having anyone oppose the Party’s candidates.

She was craving information, however, and when one of our members gave her three “western (that is, cowboy) novels to read, she accepted them almost with glee. She gave us her address and begged us to write to her, assuring us that the letters would not be censored (she was shocked to hear that we felt they might be), and that she would return the favor by writing us.

(I have since written to her, but have not received a reply, so I do not know if she has ever received my letter.)

Equality

Everyone, with the exception of the children, wears the same clothing: A blue or grey or olive drab Mao jacket and baggy trousers. Men and women. And the men (and many women) also wear the little peaked caps which several of us bought at the store.

Soldiers are seen in good numbers, but we did not see any who were armed, even on military trucks. Most of these that we saw were evidently off duty.

I should say that we did see some armed soldiers but these were guards at the border, at entrances to some buildings, etc.

On our very first night, we were taken to the gymnastics show and it was a shock to look around the audience and see a sea of faces all above the sameness of dress. Only the small children, with their bright colored jackets, pants, and shirts, broke the monotony of sameness.

And, as mentioned, everyone also seems to have a bicycle—and that bicycle is also part of this sameness: It’s painted black.

There are special stores for foreigners and our members boosted the economy considerably when they learned that the local “Friendship Store”, a fairly modern tourist trap, was just next door to our hotel.

Prices were very reasonable and the clerks spoke English. They were ready for us.

We visited a ceramics factory where we had seen many of the objects of art actually being handcrafted. These artisans each worked at a specific job (just as the oldtime worker on an auto assembly line had done years ago) and most of them had post card views of American scenes on their individual desks, evidently presented to them by earlier visitors from North America.

Canton Trade Fair

The highlight of the trip for many of us was the visit to the Canton Trade Fair which was in its last two days of a 30-day run each year.

This fair is conducted to allow China to sell to foreign nations the many products she manufactures.

So far as the art objects are concerned, the Fair was a success. Silk rugs, ceramics, and other products of this nature were in profusion and were of excellent quality.

It was the things such as sewing machines, meat grinders, airplanes, and yachts which caused us to wonder if China is really coming out of the Dark Ages yet.
We saw brand new treadle operated sewing machines and brand new meat grinders of the sort that my mother had when I was a child: The kind you clamp onto the kitchen counter and grind with one hand while pressing the meat into the top orifice with a stick held in the other hand!

Small private-type airplanes were pre-World War II style. In fact, Wiley Post would have been proud to have owned one.

And there was even a yacht for some capitalist who wasn’t afraid of the water.

The Fair was housed in a building several floors high and a block wide and two blocks long. In the entrance hung huge pictures of Mao, Lenin, and Stalin. You have to remember that the Red Chinese had their first big argument with the Russians when the Russians decided to downgrade Stalin. Josef Stalin is still a big man in the Chinese brand of Communism.

From my limited and only three-day view, I could hardly picture Red China as a modern military giant in spite of the fact that a billion people live within its borders. There is an evident effort towards education of its children, at least in the Canton area, and there is a definite desire by those to whom we talked to learn of America.

The thing that impressed me the most was the genuine friendliness of the people we met and came in contact with. Yet, this is the same people whose hoardes swept across the Yalu River in the 50s to show no mercy to South Korean and American troops on the other side.

Even though the military giant is not there, the numbers are and those numbers are impressive.

Night and Day

Part of our group returned to Hong Kong by train and the other half of us (the group I was in) came in a jet plane which was the most crowded aircraft I have ever seen.

The seats were so close that even with the seat in front of us not reclined, my knees were tightly against the back of that seat.

With no FAA to listen to, heavy baggage and other objects were placed in the overhead racks.

We were told that the crews of both the airlines and the trains were not allowed to leave their planes and trains to go into Hong Kong.

And Hong Kong is like night and day compared to Red China.

Back in Hong Kong, we were back in a capitalist world to which thousands and thousands of Chinese from the mainland escape every year with hundreds being turned back daily. On the other hand, NO ONE ever tries to escape from Hong Kong into Red China, just as no one ever tries to escape from West Germany into East Germany and just as no one ever tried to leave South Viet Nam to get into North Viet Nam.

It is this continued and continuing traffic from the worker’s paradises into the slavery of capitalism that must be recalled whenever you begin to think that maybe it is a good life behind the iron or bamboo curtains.

And it must be remembered that the revered Mao Tse Tung made Adolph Hitler look like a sissy when it came to genocide.

But China is now “open,” and its people are definitely yearning for friendship from our people.

In spite of the spartan life, I would like to return and to have the opportunity of visiting other parts of this huge country. I hope that day will come soon.