REFLECTIONS ON CHINA, FEBRUARY 12-24, 1979

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If given a chance, many Americans may choose going to China rather than the moon. I know I would. Nothing I saw or did in China during my recent 12-day visit persuaded me that it was a bad choice.

This letter will attempt to capture in words some of the amazing and puzzling sights of China. Inevitably, some opinion will seep in, the product of considerable reading both before and after the journey and of first-hand experience. If successful, this letter will serve to entice you to plot a trip to China, which in the end is the only way to appreciate her, or understand her in the least.

How the trip came about

For the past two years, Congressman Les AuCoin, D-Ore., for whom I work, has been pushing legislation to remove barriers to U.S.-Chinese trade. It has fallen to me to provide the research to back up this effort, and to develop a coalition of support for the measure.

Some success has been realized. A bill, introduced by Congressman AuCoin in early 1977, to extend official U.S. government export credits for sales to the People's Republic of China was passed favorably out of a House committee and was narrowly defeated on the House floor in the summer of 1978.

This success, especially in the absence of Administration or House leadership support, drew attention to Congressman AuCoin. Through contacts in the U.S. international trade community, important Chinese officials in Washington let it be known they appreciated this effort, which they felt forwarded the cause of normalization of relations. To demonstrate their appreciation, they indicated the Chinese government would welcome a visit to China by Congressman AuCoin.

Thus, in the late summer of 1978 I prepared a letter on Congressman AuCoin's behalf to Chinese Ambassador Han Hsu, second in command at China's Liaison Office in Washington. Only a short time passed until Ambassador Han invited both Congressman AuCoin and me to the Liaison Office for an elaborate luncheon, at which he officially extended the invitation.

We had requested to go to China in the fall, after the November general election. Ambassador Han said that time was difficult because of other already scheduled delegations and China's severe lack of hotel accommodations, a situation we can attest to after being in China. The Ambassador insisted that the trip come at the first of 1979, despite the well known cold in Peking at that time of year. Of course, we had no way of knowing how superb the timing would be, following so closely after normalization of Sino-U.S. relations.

There is no way of knowing how purposeful this coincidence was. It can be said the Chinese repeatedly underscored that our delegation was only the second official delegation since normalization--the first coming to participate in normalization formalities. It also should be noted the Chinese faithfully attend to their "old friends." Clearly, we were seen as "old friends."

Who went on the trip

Congressman AuCoin saw this trip as a chance to discuss, at a high level, vital trade policy questions pertinent to his legislative efforts in the Congress. He also saw the trip as a vehicle to put the State of Oregon on China's map of the United States.

It was to facilitate the former objective and accomplish the latter that Congressman AuCoin asked permission of our Chinese hosts to be accompanied by a small group of Oregon businessmen involved in international trade who would serve as advisers. The Chinese, whose original invitation extended only to the Congressman, his wife and me, agreed. The list of potential invitees was scrutinized at length, and finally I made calls to seven businessmen, six of whom accepted. The invitation also was for their wives. In the end, a total of 12 of us made the trip. Industries represented were the Port of Portland, a major shipping line, a timber company, a timber trading company, a partner in a joint oil venture operating in the Soviet Union, and a heavy machinery manufacturing broker.

A post script on the travelling party. It was expected of us to establish a pecking order so that at all official functions--including getting off a bus to greet a host who would give us a tour--we would move in our proper order. This may seem odd for a classless society, but it is a procedure rigorously followed. A breech is considered rudeness and arrogance. Needless to say, my eminence went unrecognized. Indeed, as the trailer in all our possessions (the suitable position for a trip's "coordinator") I find that the main host would rarely shake my hand. However, his second in command, who probably did all the work in setting up the meeting or tour, would make a point of shaking my hand.

This doesn't mean the Chinese are insensitive to the lowly. At our highest level meeting, when our party was received by Tan Zhenlin, vice chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, Congressman AuCoin introduced his associates, but overlooked me since I was sitting out of his line of sight with a commercial attache from the U.S. Liaison Office taking notes. Before Congressman AuCoin could begin his introductory remarks, he was interrupted by Vice Chairman Tan's interrupter, Zhu Man-li, who had ridden with our party the day before to the Great Wall. Mrs. Zhu said in quite unequivocal terms, "Congressman AuCoin, you have forgotten to introduce Mr. Conkling, your assistant." He quickly made amends, as she smilingly translated the introduction. Vice Chairman Tan, a short, portly man, rose slightly out of seat and nodded with a great smile in my direction. The message escaped no one.

The trip to China

We departed for China from Portland, through Seattle. Our departure was delayed seven hours when our Northwest Orient flight originating out of New York was suspended because of airplane engine problems. We finally took off on a plane hustled into Seattle from Anchorage.

The itinerary for the trip was my responsibility to develop. I relied heavily on members of our travelling party, all of whom had travelled extensively in the Orient. For Congressman AuCoin, his wife and me, it was our first trip to the Far East. One of the first pieces of advice I received was to allow for a lay-over in Tokyo after the first leg of our trip, so we could overcome jet lag. It was excellent advice. Going from Seattle to Tokyo takes 12 hours. Time passed quickly, as we had requested--again on the advice of our experienced travellers--space in the "Quiet Zone." But 12 hours in an airplane seat, no matter how quiet or roomy, is a long time. When we arrived in Tokyo's Narita Airport, it was 11 p.m. and we all needed a stretch and rest.

To our great relief, we were greeted upon deplaning by a representative of Narita International Airport, owned by Northwest Airlines. He whisked us through airport security and immigration--we had obtained temporary visas before leaving from the United States. As soon as we emerged into the common airport area, we were surrounded by a bustling bevy of chauffeurs, all attired in dark suits, hats and white gloves. They packed our luggage into a waiting row of black Toyota limousines, appointed with luxurious interiors. Off we went to the hotel, through some of the grimmest airport security imaginable, which is necessary because of the outpouring of dislike for the sprawling new airport.

The next morning, it was the same routine in reverse, with a bit more confusion but where to go. However, a Japan Air Lines supervisor came to our rescue and ushered us to our gate for our flight, through Osaka and Shanghai, to Peking.

Our entire trip went off without a hitch, and only the most minor discomforts. However, there was one blotch.

Shortly before the time we were to leave for China, a Portland insurance salesman who several years ago had worked with the Soviets in erecting a U.S. monument to the pilot/hero of a transpolar flight from Moscow to Portland, called me to ask if he could be included in the Congressman's party. Now, the Chinese already felt our party was too large for them to handle properly once in China, given their limitations on hotel rooms. So I told this gentlemen that he was out of luck. In retrospect, I was too polite to him. He told me he planned to persist, and I said something akin to, "It's a free country," a dangerous notion, it turns out.

Not only did the salesman persist, he became obnoxious. I left Washington, D.C. for Portland February 6 in order to spend a few days in our district office, which is also under my supervision. Our office manager in Washington called me on February 8, saying the insurance salesman had wired the Chinese Liaison Office asking to be added to Congressman AuCoin's party and sent by special delivery his U.S, passport to our Washington office. I was dumbfounded. Exasperated, I communicated to the Chinese that the salesman was not a member of our party. Then, I ordered that our office manager hold onto the passport and mail it February 9. We departed for China on February 10.

To my utter surprise, we encountered the insurance salesman in Narita Airport at our gate. After conferring with Congressman AuCoin, I alerted airport authorities. I had some cause for concern because once, in a conversation, the salesman told me that he was willing to persist because, "You never know, somebody could drop dead at the last minute, or be run over in front of the airport." That's hardly a threat, but it wasn't a time to take chances.

Airport authorities reported back that the insurance salesman had attempted to secure a seat on our flight to Peking. They added, to our relief, that the salesman had failed to get a seat, evidently because the plane was full.

As we flew into China, we nervously speculated whether our phantom companion would somehow make it to China--without a passport and a visa. Well, of course, the salesman did make it to Peking, how we don't know.

When he did show up, we were again questioned by the Chinese as to whether he was a member of our party, largely I suspect as a matter of politeness. Provoked, I responded that he definitely wasn't and that we were suspicious of his motives. I noted his past involvement with the Soviets, hardly a merit badge in China these days.

The Chinese, who are often referred to in certain quarters as "red butchers," chose to issue the salesman a temporary visa and allowed him to stay and see a number of sights, including the Great Wall. With the help of both the Chinese and our own Liaison Office personnel, we managed to keep the salesman away from our group. There was only one slip. The salesman furtively managed to gain entrance to the Congressman's hotel room and leave a simple note on his desk. The note read, "I hope to have a chance to talk about our China trip with you when we return." It was less harmful than a bomb, but no less outrageous.

The trip itself into China was uneventful, though I doubt whether I can forget the eerie feeling of hearing an announcement in Chinese as our plane cross into the Mainland of China. It was a mixture of awe that I was in China, and of low-level fear about slipping into "communist territory."

Airports in China hardly represent monumental public works projects. The airport at Shanghai, perhaps the largest city in the world with a population exceeding 12 million, looked like what you would expect at Terre Haute, Ind. The landing was memorable, too. The executive director of the Port of Portland, who oversees the operation of Portland International Airport, typified it as a "modified crash landing." The plane banked sharply, and suddenly, then plunged down, careening into the pavement of the runway.

We clamored out to inhale our first breath of Chinese air. We were unsure whether we could photograph the airport, so did so timorously. Guards nearby didn't move to stop us, so we dropped all pretenses and shot at will. When we moved inside the airport, we were shocked to see that we were the only ones there except for a handful of employes.

Our arrival in Peking was less cathardic. The landing, relatively speaking, was smooth. When we emerged from the plane, we were quickly spotted by our hosts and taken in tow. We knew the trip had begun officially.

What we saw and did in Peking

The Chinese are superb hosts. I had toiled to put together an itinerary with no idea whether it was possible. The Chinese made it their business to see that it was possible, and veered from it very little, and only when we stated a preference for veering from it.

Peking University: After settling in at the Peking Hotel, a burly hotel with a new wing--reserved for international businessmen, many of whom have set up virtual offices there for lack of space elsewhere--and an old wing--where we stayed, we were shuttled off in a comfortable Toyota bus to Peking University.

Congressman AuCoin, before coming to Washington, worked as an administrator at a college, so this first visit was appropriate and illustrates the sensitivity the Chinese show for small things. Another illustration: Our host at the University was the head of the economics department, because our mission was to promote trade.

Professor Hung proved to be an engaging man with a grasp of capitalism. During his discourse, we received our first of several lessons in the evils of the Cultural Revolution. The lesson was inevitably accompanied by an obligatory reference to the "smashing of the Gang of Four." However they do it, the Chinese know what the party line is and repeat it whenever given the chance. One of more startling statistics he gave us was that 3 million Chinese students annually take examinations to gain entrance to college. Only 2,000 are admitted to Peking University.

In truth, the Cultural Revolution did seem to wreak havoc on China to a greater degree that we can comprehend. Professor Hung told of basic research at the university, called the Harvard of China, being suspended for almost 10 years. Imagine where that has left research and the people who carried it out. If they were anywhere near the vanguard 10 years ago, which in most cases is not likely, they are now hopelessly behind. There can be no doubt that the radical policies of reaching outward espoused by Vice Premier Teng Hsiao-ping are rooted in the pragmatic realization that China has no other choice if she is to industrialize and achieve her promise as a great nation.

The discussion with Professor Hung revealed another remarkable thread clearly evident everywhere we went in China, and that is the need for weaving capitalism into the fabric of China's economy. Hung spoke of the necessity to give workers incentives, and of the importance in accelerating the education and training of a new generation of Chinese capable of carrying the Middle Kingdom into a new technological era.

When I returned to Washington after my trip, I attended a briefing at the Brookings Institution where noted sinologist Doak Barnett, who was born in China in 1921, speculated that an economic revolution is occurring within China today that could shake the foundations of communism, and perhaps even capitalism. Barnett termed what is evolving in China as "market socialism." It is an apt term. There is no question a central economic planning apparatus will remain, but more power is being siphoned off to the "corporate" level, where managers are being encouraged and given the authority to innovate. They also are being held responsible, as are their capitalist counterparts, to boost profits, reduce costs and ensure quality.

In the end the legacy of Teng may not be how many cronies he installed in the government, but how many market socialists he unleashed in Chinese business corporations. The carefully orchestrated portraits of America and American prosperity beamed back to China while Teng was in the United States may have whetted material appetites that cannot be quenched with ideology. If the unabashed curiosity we witnessed in China is a sign, I would say Teng has planted many seeds.

Peking Opera: No trip to China is complete without a visit to the Great Wall and the Chinese opera. Unfortunately, we saw the opera our first night in Peking, and our body clocks kept us from fully enjoying it. I sat next to a talkative interpreter and kept awake throughout. Virtually everyone else dosed off. It also helped that I had seen a scene or two of the opera when the PRC sent a travelling troupe of artists to the United States last year. The story, in brief, was a folk tale--the likes of which were barred during the Cultural Revolution because presumably they lacked the class struggle angle--about two snakes who transfigured themselves into attractive young women. The white snake falls in love with a young gentlemen and their life is bliss, until the husband's trust of his wife is poisoned by the news that she really is a serpent. The villains were quashed, but the marriage was disrupted. It was both a sad and happy ending. The Chinese characters accepted their fate without violent outbursts.

Great Wall: The Great Wall deserves to be called great. We reached it by traversing an ever-narrowing, jagged road leading into gnarled hills. The ride was bumpy, and at one point we actually stopped our bus because it sounded as if a wheel had worked loose. Once at the Great Wall, only a portion of which has been restored, we climbed up. Its wide elevated walkway is steep. We felt like ski jumpers leaning over our skis as we walked up one particularly steep incline. It was cold. We were bundled up, with layers of clothing underneath heavy coats and furry caps. Most had on long underwear. We still felt wind-blown and chilled. Standing astride a relic of history of the magnitude of the Great Wall in itself gives you the chills. It seemed inconceivable that such a project could have been carried out, even today with our construction technology. Two points stuck with me. The first, that man-made wonders are only wonders for awhile. The Great Wall, though still marvelous, offers little protection and, therefore, by definition is worthless. The second, the Great Wall stands as a symbol of old Chinese ways--doing the impossible to keep foreigners out. The new pragmatism carries with it a tenet that not only is it unprofitable to stay divorced from the outside world, it also is impossible, so why not make the most of the opportunity. That's an attitude most Americans can relate to, which is why I believe the common ground between Americans and Chinese is considerable.

Ming Tombs: A day of the Great Wall is paired with visiting the Ming Tombs, tucked away in a serene valley north of Peking. The valley is lush compared to Peking and the hills and mountains surrounding the Great Wall. The area evidently also was tranquil, and off the beaten track, which is why the Ming Emperors chose it for their secrecy-shrouded burial chambers. It was their custom to design elaborate underground crypts, then to assasinate the architect to prevent the spread of knowledge of its whereabouts and how to gain entrance. There are 13 tombs, three of which have been discovered and only one of which has been excavated. We visited the excavated one. There is not much to see, really. There is a wall plaque that denotes all the battles this particular Emperor undertook to secure the knoll in which his final resting place would be scratched out. There are his stone thrones and some aged porcelain vases. Perhaps the most spectacular sight were the stone carvings lining the graceful entrance to the pagoda that oversees the burial chamber. The carvings included a resting camel, a standing camel, a resting elephant, a standing elephant, a resting lion, a standing lion and a series of human figures. All were well preserved.

Summer Palace: Our time here was limited. We saw only the lakefront walkway and ate at a restaurant exclusively for important guests on the lower level of the palace. The residential portion of the palace has a distinct Victorian flavor. The lakefront, including a view of the Bridge of the Seven Arches, was invigorating despite teeth-chattering temperatures that froze the water. It was eye-pleasing sight to watch as families and youngsters walked and cavorted across the icy surface sparkling in the sunlight. I went camera-crazy.

Imperial Palace/The Forbidden City: A formidable complex of buildings, paved squares and bridges spanning more pavement, the Forbidden City sits directly across from Tienanmen Square, the largest square in the world, according to the Chinese. The Forbidden City, home to Chinese Emperors, seems endless. Halls to receive guests, to hand down imperial pronouncements, to work and to lounge sit in a row, with their curved-pitched roofs lined up exactly. In fact, the roofs also square with the important pagoda atop Coal Hill, perhaps a mile or more from the gate to the Forbidden City, and with Mao's Mauseleum, which is to the south of the City in the middle of Tienanmen Square. The symbolism is live, showing that Mao and his government have supplanted the dynastic order and have done so on behalf of the masses.

Peking Zoo: A small part of our mission was to make an appeal for a rare animal exchange that would bring a pair of Giant Pandas to Portland's Washington Park Zoo. The Chinese set about complying with this issue, as if a real chance for such an exchange existed, which it doesn't. For one thing, Pandas are relatively rare and the government has determined they may not be exchanged, rather only given as a state gift. Our trip to the zoo took place nevertheless and we were treated to a memorable visit behind the Panda cages. We were able to thrust our camera lenses inside the cage, shooting freely as the Pandas lolled and chomped on carrots. One was so close she almost gave my camera snoot a "ferocious" lick, with her tongue. Pandas are herbivorous. As we reluctantly trooped out of the cage, the zoo keeper gave all of us Panda lapel pins. Mary Beth, as might be expected, expropriated it as soon as I returned.

Great Hall of the People: This cavernous edifice sits alongside Tienanmen Square. The Chinese proudly boast the Great Hall was built in just 18 months. Regretably, it looks it. The building's design leaves much to be desired. The sole virtue it advances is sheer space, so much of it one wonders whether a large tent might not have made more sense. The auditorium reputedly will hold 10,000 Chinese, snugly to be sure, and underneath the omnipresent red star is embedded in the otherwise dully lit ceiling. There also is a gigantic banquet hall that will hold almost three football fields. Intimacy is not the byword of this place. A number of conference rooms dot the building, most named for China's provinces. Each contains works of art distinctive of the province they represent. The art work generally is superb, especially the carvings and paintings. Entrance to the Great Hall of the People, not unlike its ancient ancestor, the Forbbiden City, is by invitation.

Tienanmen Square: A public square is something you see, not experience. Tienanmen Square is so huge, you have to experience it without fully seeing it all. I walked the Square early one morning before the sun had dawned, and it bristled with activity. The Chinese exercise in droves, regardless of age. We strolled past clumps of elderly Chinese either learning or practicing Tai-chi, a form of meditative shadow boxing that appears to be good for both body and soul. There also were bands of Young Pioneers doing calisthentics and jogging in unison. The padding of their soft-soled shoes would have made great background noise on the sound track of a political suspense thriller about the Yellow Horde. I also walked the Square one morning when the sun was up, mostly to photograph it as best I could. Once the sun pops up, Chinese families queue for the chance to be photographed with the gate of the Forbidden City in the background. The Young Pioneers are still there, now joined by mounds of visitors staring at Mao's Mauseleum, the needle commemorating the establishment of the People's Republic and each other. I lurked behind a tree and shot as many vignettes as possible.

What we saw and did in Shanghai

First a brief word about Shanghai. It is one of three municipalities directly under control of the central government. It has 8,000 small to large factories. Its industrial output since 1949 has increased 19.2 times. There are 198 people's communes surrounding Shanghai producing wheat, rice, barley, cotton, oil-bearing crops and vegetables. The city is self-sufficient in vegetables. Officials boast that 90 per cent of the cultivated land is plowed by machine and 98 per cent irrigated by electric pump. Shanghai has 17,000 shops.

Brain surgery with acupuncture: Huashan Hospital was assigned by the government the specialty of neurology and hand surgery. It has done pioneer work in transplanting big toes to replace amputated thumbs and in transplanting knees from cadavers. We witnessed a two-theater spectacle with brain surgery in one and thyroid surgery in the other. Both operations used acupunture anesthesia. The theaters resembled a bus depot more than enything else, with exposed radiators and windows facing outside. The room was lighted largely from the stream of sunshine from the windows, with only poor man-made light. There was a small lamp that dribbled a thin shard of light over the chief surgeon's shoulder, but two or three times during the operation the light plug was knocked out of its socket by the doctor attending the electronic acupuncture stimulator. Once the surgeon didn't notice for several minutes. The operation took just two hours, and appeared successful. A benign tumor the size of an egg was plucked from the patient's skull. After sew-up, the woman retained the presence of mind to tuck her hospital robe under her for modesty, to smile up at us and, as she was being lifted ungently onto a gurney, to wave. I was too stunned to snap the shutter on my camera.

When I was back in the United States, I talked to a doctor and a dentist about acupuncture. The dentist, himself of Chinese extraction, thinks acupuncture has great potential and already is deploying it instead of novocaine. The doctor, however, said that while acupuncture has merits, it requires extensive pre-operative preparations and is not economical given Western medical practices. What shapes up, then, may well be a debate over quality versus quantity on anesthesia. Coloring the debate may be a reluctance by Westerners to undergo major surgery while still conscious. The knife is one thing, but the saw prying off a flap of skull is another. We live in an interesting time when the present goes full circle and meets the past. I suspect the Chinese grasp that reality better than we do.

Feng Pan People's Commune: No visit to China is complete without inspecting a people's commune. We toured one that was quite prosperous--by China's standards. Its strongest workers get paid 800 yuan annually, or a little more than $400. That includes incentive pay. The average worker pulls in 350 yuan. This particular commune supports 25,000 members. It grows rice, cotton, pigs (a horribly ugly variety), poultry breeding stock, fish and mushrooms. Indeed, the commune features 190,000 square feet (by Chinese measure) of shelf space for growing mushrooms. Some of them were huge.

While walking around, we saw a team of women digging up black soil from a drained fish pond, loading it on shoulder buckets--110-pound loads--and toting it off into the fields to build a ridge on which to cross-plant another crop. The women receive higher pay than their male supervisors.

The commune is served by a country clinic, with its own staff including a barefoot doctor, a mix between a paramedic and an Appalachian granny doctor. The barefoot doctor, when we saw him, was applying an acupunture treatment to an old man who complained of a migraine headache for the past 10 days. We also saw the maternity ward, a cold, stark hutch where two young mothers were huddled under thick blankets while their newborn children slept nearby under the watch of what appeared to be their grandmothers. On the floor below stood a the gynecology and obstetrics room. It was encouraging to see such a room, but you couldn't help wince at seeing a hat rack in one corner holding a number of rubber gloves. The clinic had its own pharmacy, laboratory and dentist's chair.

A note on the economy of the commune. One of the deepest tensions in China is the split between rural and urban areas. It was Chiang Kai-shek's inattentiveness to rural areas that gave Mao his opening. The Peasant Ethic still reigns in China today, and much government policy is directed to keep the folks--all 800 million of them--happy down on the farm. For the people in China's harsh interior, the situation is bleak. But for the farmers on the periphery of metropolises such as Shanghai, the situation is potentially explosive. Thus, we were treated to an exhaustive explanation of what is happening to transform the countryside in China. At Feng Pang, some 1,800 commune members work at industry, either making lamps for export, clothing or parts for heavy machinery under subcontract. The plan calls for abother 2,200 commune members to be recruited, with the inducement of higher pay, for additional industrial enterprise. This will be possible as profits from industry are channeled into buying farm machinery in order to mechanize operations and free more hands for manufacturing. It is a rational plan, and has salved much discontent caused by the Gang of Four's "Down to the Countryside" program, an unmitigated disaster that dispatched city dwellers to remote agricultural areas to work on communes. The commune veterans were upset at having to share sparse income with newcomers who couldn't pull their weight because of inexperience with the rigors of farmwork. The city expatriates were disenchanted because of the cultural shock of being uprooted to places with none of the urban pleasures of Shanghai. The recent student riots had more to do with this reality than anything else. Students who applied for unviersity admission, but were unsuccessful, faced assignment to the boondocks. In an age where expectations are rising for China collectively, some students felt their expulsion to the countryside would leave them out. An outcry of materialism at its core.

Port of Shanghai: Because of the predominance of interest among our group in shipping and port facilities, we visited the Port of Shanghai, an expansive port on the order of Tokyo/Yokohama and San Francisco/Oakland. (Earlier, we had trained 60 miles east of Peking to Tientsin, one of China's important northern port cities and a former British stronghold, as evidenced by its famous hotel, the Astor House, now the Grant Tientsin Hotel.) Ports everywhere have a sameness, and Shanghai is no exception, save one distinction. China is trying to get into containerized cargo and it hasn't quite made it. National shipping officials invested in a pile of containers which sit gleaming on the container dock in Shanghai. They haven't been used because the Chinese don't have the backup capability to stuff the containers, nor the computer capability to handle them efficiently.

Ma Ling Canning Factory: This was a fascinating side trip, where we saw a substance resembling Spam being canned. The factory blended new machinery with old-style labor-intensive assembly lines. The manager of the plant proudly showed us a lathe, used in making cans, that an engineer at the plant developed. Unfortunately, the lathe wasn't fully utilized because it was hitched to horse-and-buggy supporting equipment. We were sat down and fed the full array of Ma Ling's canned cuisine, from mushrooms to crab apple drink. We all were dressed in white work coats and poorly fitting, at least for us big-footed Westerners, galoshes to slog around the plant.
We were a sight, looking like Bavarian butchers.

Shanghai Arts & Crafts Research Institute: This was a pleasant diversion, particularly watching an expert folk-art paper-cutter at work. I've never seen anyone make paper literally dance in his hand. There also was an ivory carver who produced beautiful work, and took exceeding pride in his ability to carve fine, small objects.

What we saw and did in Southern China

Kwangchow: This is the Chinese name for Canton, and here we saw Martyr's Park where Chou En-lai was celebrated to the hilt, partially because he sparked the Communist Revolution in this part of China, but also because you sensed the people knew who the real brains was behind China's progress. We saw the Canton Trade Fair building and toured a bit in the countryside, seeing lush fields chocked full of plantings. We took a day off in Kwangchow and walked about, shopping and meeting with people. It was one of the most pleasant days we spent in China.

Kweilin: Located in a province on the border between China and Vietnam, Kweilin sits among the most unusual mountain outcroppings in the world, called the Buttefly Mountains. The mountains transfix you, especially if, as we did, you drink them in on a balmy sunny day while drifting down the Li River in a boat. Kweilin is a resort area, plunked down in a rural agricultural area. So while the city is stunning, the people are coarse, as I discovered when I walked alone on the poorly lit streets at night. I never feared for my safety, but shades of James Joyce's Ulysses' Nighttown sequence came over me as I heard grunts emerge from faint figures rushing by me in the shadows. Also while we were in Kweilin, we visited the Reed Flute Cave, a spacious hollow inside one of the outcroppings that has been cleverly lit to conjure up images of forests, villages and giant mushrooms.

What we ate in China

All the food we consumed was generally good, except for those occasions where the Chinese decided to treat us to American cuisine, cooked in their imitative style. We had three such meals, and all were atrocious. We ate much better than the average Chinese, especially at welcoming banquets, of which we had three. All were pleasant, but the best was in Kwangchou where we reveled in the splendors of Cantonese cooking, including such delectables as turtle soup, shark lip filets and shark fin soup. We declined the delight of stepping out to Canton's famous Snake Restaurant where a patron may wander to the snake pit and point out his dinner. Spring dog also escaped our menus, but we did munch on bear and eel in Peking. The next best restaurants after the one in Canton were the Fanshan, where we hosted a return banquet, and the Peking Duck, the scene of our welcoming banquet to Peking. The Fanshan, just recently finished, sports an idyllic view of a lake and excellent food. The Peking Duck features duck, each and every part except for the feathers, and I wasn't all that certain the feathers weren't somewhere on our plates.

The Sino-Vietnam War

While we were in China, Vice Premier Teng elected to teach the Vietnamese a lesson by massing somewhere between 200,000 to 1 million troops on the border and striking with shocking suddenness into weakly fortified northern Vietnam. Despite what anyone says, China could have rolled into Hanoi, if that would have been its purpose. Vietnam was terribly exposed with its fighting elite mired down in Kampuchea.

This troublesome episode underlines how little Westerners understand about nationalistic impulses, as well as face-saving and symbolism, in the Far East. We were stunned to hear of the Chinese marching arm and arm through an area pocked with land mines to clear a path for tanks. I for one don't comprehend that kind of warfare. I'm also unsure whether American leaders fully grasp what is happening

as Vietnam, puffed up with visions of being victorious over the French and us and armed to the teeth by the Soviets and what we left behind, is being lured into the Russian camp because of our indifference and its fear of China's resurgence. We saw Vietnam attacking Cambodia and China attacking Vietnam in linear terms, set in motion by the pesky Soviets. That's admittedly a factor. But there is a very real sense of paranoia that engulfs all nations in the Far East. Vietnam sees itself imperiled by the Chinese. China sees itself imperiled by the Soviets. Russia sees itself boxed in by Western Europe, the USA and now China.

American response to the situation has been too sluggish in my view. We have dawdled and veered from our normal course by failing to achieve some form of normalized relations with Vietnam after the cessation of hostilities. We also have ignored the concerns of the five ASEAN nations, including Indonesia, a significant oil producing state. Thailand, an important ally in Southeast Asia, borders Cambodia and could be drawn into a debilitating struggle unless we take steps to stabilize this region of the world.

While in China, we saw little evidence of a general mobilization. Indeed, the People's Daily covered the border dispute with vexing brevity, informing the populace each day that fighting continued inside Vietnam, and that Vietnam was being taught a lesson. Our Chinese guides relied on us for information, including encouraging us to listen to Voice of America for dispatches on the conflict. We suspected their radios were tuned in as well.

Observations about the people

The people behave as they are told, but there are no signs of heavy-handed oppression. We detected no resentment to following the party line.

The same words and phrases crop up over and over, such as "Our friends from America," "After Liberation," and "Ten years of the Cultural Revolution set us back 20 years." After each plant tour, we adjourned for tea and a conference at which we were asked for our criticisms and suggestions of what we had seen. This was prefaced by an admission that China was backward.

Little is wasted in China. There is no litter, partially because there is no consumer economy, but also because every scrap has some purpose. The China we saw was not sterile and hygienic, but it was clean. Men and women were seen everywhere brooming their stoops and streets.

The Chinese, whatever the reason, have a thirst for learning English. I was encountered on the Bund in Shanghai by a middle-aged naval worker who asked if I would speak English to him so he could practice. Before long, a throng had formed around us and pressed in to hear each word spoken and to watch my lips form the words. I can never recall anyone before that hanging on my every word, though I often thought people should have. Two young girls in Kwangchow followed us around while we searched for a certain antique store. When we appeared lost, the girls tapped us on the shoulder and advised that we had taken a wrong turn. They then offered to escort us to the store. When we arrived, we thanked them and asked why they had followed us. They said it was the least they could do for foreigners, and beside they wanted to hear us talk English. We asked why they were learning English, and they replied without hesitating, "Because it's our duty." One of our interpreters appeared to have the sole task of listening for American idioms, jotting them down and inquiring of us what they meant. This apparently is an effort to equip interpreters better for handling American groups, but also to add further understanding of Americans.

The gap between our languages--and our interpretation--was never clearer than when we were meeting with the Minister of Communications, who runs China's ports. The point was made by one of our party that the Port of Portland had the lowest rates of any major West Coast port. The message got translated that Portland had the poorest rates on the West Coast. I was sitting next to a second interpreter who picked up the goof, and I quickly scribbled a note to Congressman AuCoin who corrected the mistake. Needless to say, the Minister remained attentive throughout the rest of the presentation, whereas if the mistake had not been caught we may have watched him doze off.

There are no lawns in China, and few pets.

Foreign guests are always taken to the head of lines. Overseas Chinese, however, are afforded the most regal treatment. Interestingly, the Chinese accept this, presumably as an expression of politeness. Only once did we experience any hostility. and that came when a woman wielding what appeared to be knitting needles chased after two women in our group for some unknown reason.

Great respect is shown to older people. Retirement in China is optional for men at 60 and at 55 for women. Retirees are expected to help out, but are not paid for their work.

There is more variation in dress in the south, farther from the Peking central bureaucracy. Things appear to be opening up all over. We received reports of a disco in Peking, though didn't have an open evening to investigate. Such a reality is remarkable in China, but it also could prompt a backlash. There are still many Chinese who shudder at the thought of Chinese girls gyrating with foreigners. It is something to watch as China's Great Leap Outward continues.

Economic condition of the average Chinese

In factories wage rates range from a starting salary of $26 dollars per month to $71. The manager of the Ma Ling cannery we visited was paid $100 per month.

Workers are paid bonuses, partly because of collective achievements by a group and because of individual achievement. In the Ma Ling cannery, 50 per cent of the workers received merit bonuses. Bonuses also are paid for good safety records.

The brain surgeon we watched makes $50 per month. An experienced brain surgeon can earn up to $200 per month.

Workers in factories enjoy 100 per cent government-paid health care plus 50 per cent for dependents. Mothers who work get free day care, though they must pay for the food their children eat. When a mother gives birth, she receives 56 paid days off. When they return to work, they are allowed 30 minutes in the morning and afternoon to nurse their children.

Chinese workers get off seven national holidays annually, plus one day off per week, not necessarily Sunday.

In the commune we visited, we calculated that the average family has a net income of $650 per year. That can be supplemented somewhat by what they grow on their private plot. And, peasants have the security of owning their own house. Health care and welfare costs also are picked up by the commune.

Businessmen, shopkeepers and owners who stayed after 1949 when the Communists took over were given credit by the government for the value of the assets appropriated. They are paid 2 to 3 per cent interest on that value annually. The typical Chinese has a small savings account, which pays 3.3 per cent interest on 12-month time deposits and 2.5 per cent on regular passbook savings.

In 1977, there was a general 15 per cent wage increase for factory workers, the first such increase since 1965.

As best we could determine, an average individual with an income of $30 per month will spend $7-$10 for food and $1-$3 for housing. He will put $1-$3 in savings, leaving the balance for fuel, clothes and entertainment--the Chinese are inveterate movie-goers, and there is--of all things--a Shakespearean playhouse in Shanghai.

Essential items to the Chinese are steep. A bicycle, the predominant mode of transportation, costs $90. Rice costs 10 cents a pound and is rationed. It is some consolation that inflation is nil. Rice 10 to 15 years ago only cost 9 cents a pound. The brain surgery we watched cost $25.