

Remarks of Congressman Les AuCoin

"China"

Portland City Club Speech

March 9, 1979

Twenty-six days ago, I was with several English language students in a classroom at Peking University.

The classroom was bare, unheated, and as bleak as any I think I've ever seen. It could have been an old one-room country school out of America's past.

But it wasn't. It was the "Harvard of China" -- Peking University. A school so exclusive that over a million students apply to get in each year. Out of that, some 2,000 are enrolled.

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Six days later in Shanghai, I watched as a Chinese brain surgeon performed surgery on a woman. A single acupuncture needle inserted near her nose was the only anesthesia.

She was alert throughout the operation. She even coughed when ordered to during the operation.

And then after it was done, as they were wheeling her out of the room. . .she looked through the window at my companions and me. . .and smiled and waved at us!

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These contradictions -- the primitive and the sophisticated -- describe the China I saw during a visit by 12 Oregonians to the People's Republic of China.

It was an unusual trip. The Chinese invited me as a ranking member of the International Trade Subcommittee who's been working in Congress to stimulate U.S. trade with China. They agreed, in turn, to let me invite five Oregon men and their wives who share my interest in foreign trade. They served as fellow travellers and advisors.

The trip turned out to be only the second Congressional tour of China since diplomatic relations were restored. And it was the first time a member of Congress had led a delegation from one of the states. Both facts gave a special significance to the trip.

It wasn't a trade mission. Instead, my two objectives were: first, to gather as much information as possible to prepare for Congressional debates on trade policy -- and especially Chinese trade -- later this year. Then secondly, I wanted to use the occasion to lay groundwork for vigorous Oregon trade with China in the future.

There's always the temptation to draw broad conclusions after a brief first trip to a country like China. And I'm quite aware that, given the complexity of this country, 12 days are not nearly enough time for definitive analysis. However, some things seem clear and today I want to give you: 1) my impressions of China today; 2) my assessment of the potential for U.S.-China trade and what could be in it for Oregon; and 3) some human glimpses of life inside this nation of riddles -- a nation we need to understand as clearly as possible in the decades to come.

First of all, China is a very, very poor country. And yet today -- for the first time in its history -- it's meeting the basic necessities of life. People are not hungry. They are housed. They appear in good health. They are warmly clothed. To do this with limited resources for a billion people is a massive achievement.

China is backward. Everywhere you go, the people themselves use that word. But that fact becomes small compared to the country's amazing emphasis on improvement.

It's everywhere. In government offices. In schools. In the streets. Among the people. In the neighborhoods.

I'm not talking simply about the government's well-known modernization program.

I'm talking about how this spirit of improvement has spilled over into personal lives.

In Canton, for example, two teenage girls joined a crowd that pressed in around my wife, Sue, and our interpreter as they talked to a clerk to find the location of a shop described in a travel log we had. The shop we were looking for had no street number and so even our interpreter was at a loss.

After we got our instructions, we took a hot, humid forty-five minute walk, interrupted with countless stops and photographs. Then all of a sudden, Sue felt someone tapping on her shoulder.

She turned -- and there were the same two teenage girls we had seen nearly an hour earlier. With beaming smiles, they told us we'd just walked two blocks past the shop we wanted. Then they explained that they had listened to our conversation because they were learning English and they wanted to watch the different ways English words were used so they could become good at it. A thirst for improvement.

I saw it again in Kweilin, when I spent part of an afternoon with my camera, wandering through some neighborhoods by myself. After I had stopped to take a shot of a woman at a scrub-board, a young man of 20 approached me and invited me into his family's home. It was a rare opportunity and I quickly took him up on it.

There, in a tiny two-room shanty which housed a family of five, I found stacks of books, magazines and journals. After he and his father explained they were trying to learn English on their own, we spent half an hour simply speaking words aloud, with them urging me to correct their pronunciation.

China is a primitive nation. Nevertheless, I found it supremely self-confident. You have a sense that it knows where it's going. And this strikes a visitor from the industrial western world, where indecision, uncertainty, and self-doubt have been all too evident.