



# China Tripping

Encountering the Everyday  
in the People's Republic

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*悟 (wu) means "to realize, comprehend, come clear about" and is perhaps the best single-character approximation of the idea of "Aha!" that runs through this book.*

Peking University. Zhou delivered remarks that we foreign students had been admonished to listen to carefully and in silence. Right up there with him on the rostrum was the Party secretary, Zhou Lin, who was a tough old bird, aged sixty-six at the time, who had been involved in political and security work for the Party before 1949 and had been through various political ups and downs (who hadn't?) in the years after. Throughout Zhou Peiyuan's speech, Zhou Lin was chatting away with the person beside him. Not only was the chatting visible to everyone, but as the microphone in front of him was still on, it was also audible to everyone—not comprehensibly, but rather as a kind of drone accompanying the melody. I vaguely sensed what was going on at the time—in any case, I found it worth writing about in my diary—but by now I have read enough anthropology to see more clearly what it was all about: Zhou Lin was signaling, not just to Zhou Peiyuan but to everyone, who was really the boss even before the new university president was formally in place.

## 悟

### THE REHABILITATION OF SOCIOLOGY

Martin King Whyte

1979

After the post-Mao reforms were launched, the American Council of Learned Societies and Social Science Research Council decided to send a delegation to China to gather information about plans for reviving social science and humanities disciplines, which had been decimated under Mao. I was asked to join the delegation, and Burt Pasternak (anthropology, Hunter College) and I were assigned to investigate plans for the revival of sociology and anthropology, which in China are lumped together as *sociology*.

Soon after our delegation arrived in Beijing in December 1979, Burt and I were driven to a large meeting hall where we were to spend an entire day hearing reports about plans to “rehabilitate” sociology. When we entered the hall, we were warmly greeted by several dozen surviving sociologists and anthropologists, all in their sixties,



seventies, and eighties. In the morning session, Fei Xiaotong, who had received a British anthropology PhD in the 1930s and was now president of the newly established Chinese Sociological Research Association, presided over a wide-ranging review of the plans for sociology. We knew that during the 1956 Hundred Flowers Campaign, Fei had led a failed effort to have the ban on sociology, imposed in 1952, lifted. Now he was getting another chance.

In the afternoon, the floor was turned over to Lin Yaohua, holder of a 1940 Harvard anthropology PhD and a leading professor in the Central Nationalities Academy. Lin launched into a parallel discussion of plans for the future of ethnology (*minzuxue*, research on China's national minorities). As Lin started speaking, the atmosphere in the hall became noticeably tense. Everyone in the hall knew, as did Burt and I, that Fei and Lin hated each other, and with good reason. In 1957, Lin Yaohua was the leading critic of Fei Xiaotong during the Anti-Rightist Campaign when Fei was labeled a rightist and condemned to political and professional purgatory for twenty years. We also all knew that in the early 1970s, after Fei was partially rehabilitated, he had to work in ethnology under the control of his denouncer. When Fei was allowed to meet with a visiting American anthropologist in 1972 (with Lin in attendance), he was obliged to renounce all of his earlier work and to declare that sociology and anthropology were not needed because they were "disciplines under the control of bourgeois ideology." Now, seven years later, Fei was exulting in his opportunity to escape from the confines of ethnology and the clutches of Lin Yaohua and spearhead the revival of sociology. It was equally clear that Lin was very resentful at being left behind in the sterile backwater of ethnology. Burt and I concluded that if the political wheel turned again, Lin would be only too eager to lead another attack on Fei.

As if this were not enough drama for one day, more was to come. As the meeting was concluding, I was approached by Lei Jieqiong, who had received an American sociology MA in the 1930s and was now slated for a leading role in the yet-to-be-established Department of Sociology at Peking University. She asked to meet with me privately in my room in the Beijing Hotel at 7:00 p.m. to provide more details on the plans for sociology. I readily agreed, but that evening, 7:00 p.m. passed and no Professor Lei appeared. Finally, after 7:30, she knocked loudly on my door. When she came in, she was furious and almost in tears. She told me that when she arrived at the hotel, security guards would not let her enter. She protested angrily that, among her other

titles, she was currently a vice mayor of Beijing, and since the Beijing Hotel fell under city administration, she had every right to enter. But the guards stood their ground, and it took further extended arguments and appeals to higher authorities before they finally relented and allowed her in. Our conversation during the remainder of her visit was as much about the idiocy of Chinese bureaucracy as about the prospects for sociology. (Fortunately, Chinese sociology revived and has flourished since, despite its rocky relaunch.)

Later in that trip, I had another illuminating experience that had nothing to do with sociology. After a dinner banquet in Shanghai, some of our group decided to walk back to our hotel. As we set off after 9:30, the streets were very dimly lit. We saw only an occasional lonely bicyclist or late-night bus. It seemed that the entire population of Shanghai was already home for the night, if not asleep. As we approached a major intersection we saw something peculiar. Several dozen middle-aged and older women were lined up on both sides of the cross street and across the intersection, spaced about ten feet apart. A policeman was out in the street, directing the women where to stand. Ever the nosy American, I went up to the policeman and asked, "What are these women doing?" Unhappy seeing foreigners, he responded brusquely, "They are not doing anything!" Stymied by his angry but technically accurate answer, we turned left and continued on down the same street.

Perhaps ten minutes later, we heard a sound and turned to see a cortege of black limousines speeding past us. It was not until the next morning that we understood what we had viewed. An important Japanese trade delegation had arrived on a late flight at the old Hongqiao airport, and the limousines were whisking them to their hotel. Apparently, the Shanghai authorities were worried that some residents might remember Japanese war atrocities in 1937 and come out to throw rocks at the cars of the visiting Japanese, thus disrupting current Sino-Japanese relations. So they had the police notify residents' committees along the route that the Japanese would be traveling by, telling them to mobilize the nighttime sentries we had observed, just to be on the safe side. We joked among ourselves that, even if Jesus Christ were to make his second coming in Boston or New York, it was hard to imagine that local residents could be roused from their beds at night in this fashion in order to guarantee his safe arrival.