

China Tripping

Encountering the Everyday
in the People's Republic

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He (co) means "to realize, comprehend, come clear about" and is perhaps the best single character approximation of the idea of "Ah!" that runs through this book.

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"Doesn't your mother like silk? . . . China has silk. China has jade carvings, China has cloisonné. Why do you buy a farmer's broom to represent China to your mother?" I began to realize that the guide saw what I had done as possibly "unfriendly." My mother and I were looking down on China.

For me, the misunderstanding raised a question that had not occurred to me before: Did this guide, deep inside, respect China's working people, the wielders of brooms—and want my mother to have the impression that "China is silk" only because he guessed that she, from a bourgeois society, would respect silk but not brooms? Or could the problem be deeper? Could it be that the ideal socialist society of my mind was more theory than reality? Could it be that Chinese people, including this guide, only pretended to value brooms over silk? The answer wasn't clear to me, but the question opened a window.

Two weeks later, our group was in Tangshan, in northeastern Hebei province, where we descended into the famous nearby coal mines. I noticed that, deep in the mines, there were signs for directions and safety, but no revolutionary slogans. In sharp contrast, on the earth's surface, quotations from Chairman Mao on bold red signs with white or gold letters were almost everywhere. I asked our guide why there were no Mao quotations down in the mines.

The suggestion caused her to scowl. "Too dirty!" she blurted.

Wheels began turning inside my slow mind. So: the dirt of the mines is all right for the working class, but not for the thoughts of its leader?

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WHERE ARE THE CHILD PSYCHOLOGISTS?

Martin King Whyte

1973

I was invited to be the "China expert" accompanying a delegation of American child psychologists that the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China (CSCPRC) sent to China in November 1973. The trip allowed me to visit for the first time the country I had been studying from a distance for close to a

decade. Although my discipline, sociology, had been abolished in China in 1952, psychology had survived within the Chinese Academy of Sciences on the grounds that it is partially a physical science. Chinese child psychologists had published some research articles in the 1950s, so it made sense that child psychology would be the field of the first CSCPRC social science delegation to China. I was not a child psychologist, but as a family sociologist, the CSCPRC apparently decided I was close enough. There were a dozen other members of the delegation, which was headed by William Kessen, a distinguished child psychologist at Yale. We entered China in the old-fashioned way, crossing the Lowu bridge on foot from Hong Kong and walking toward Shenzhen, then a sleepy train depot surrounded by farm fields, where we boarded a train for Guangzhou.

Early in our tour of five cities over three weeks, it became apparent that we and our Chinese hosts had some differing assumptions that were causing misunderstandings. We were immediately puzzled, for example, by the transportation protocol. Each morning as we set out, Bettye Caldwell, an accomplished but somewhat junior member of our delegation, rode in a sedan up front with local education officials, while the rest of us, including Bill Kessen, rode behind in a van. This happened, it turned out, because the CSCPRC had sent our hosts the names of our delegation in alphabetical order. The hosts assumed that Bettye, listed first, was our leader. When we explained that this was not the case (and expressed surprise that Maoist China was concerned with status rankings), Bettye was demoted to the van, and Bill Kessen took his rightful place in the lead sedan.

As we visited nursery schools and kindergartens in Guangzhou, my colleagues began to express frustration that we weren't seeing any primary or middle schools. This problem, it turned out, arose because the title of our group, "Childhood Education Delegation," had been translated as *youer jiaoyu daibiao tuan*—"Preschool Education Delegation." When we indicated that we wanted to see schools above the toddler level, our hosts rearranged our schedule for us.

Our hosts also adjusted our itinerary after we complained that we were going to visit coastal cities only. In response, they gave us Xi'an instead of Tianjin. The buried terra cotta warriors at Xi'an had not yet been discovered, so for sightseeing we had to make do with a visit to the hot springs where Chiang Kai-shek had been kidnapped by Zhang Xueliang's troops in 1936. My enduring memory of Xi'an in 1973 is how people there were even less accustomed to seeing foreigners than

were the people of Guangzhou and Beijing. At the Bell Tower in the center of the city, a few dozen people stopped to watch us as we began climbing up the stairs. By the time we reached the top and had begun to descend, more than a thousand people surrounded the Bell Tower, gawking up at us as if we were descending from Mars.

Another of my vivid impressions was the palpable anxiety and fear that lay just under the surface. This was understandable in view of the chaotic political campaigns in Mao's final years. On one occasion, for example, I was walking across the lobby of the old Beijing Hotel and noticed that on the crimson velvet draperies that lined the lobby walls, where Mao quotations in large white characters had once been displayed, the characters had been removed, but their indentations were still visible. I turned to our young guide and asked him what this removal meant. He replied, in a quavering voice, "I have no idea."

Another memory from that same lobby illustrates my great potential as a predictor of Chinese political trends. I had descended from my room one evening to buy some postcards. Wandering across the dimly lit lobby, I heard a noise off to my left and looked up at the large doors of a banquet hall atop a short flight of stairs. The doors swung open, and who should come walking out but the only-recently-rehabilitated Deng Xiaoping. He was followed some paces behind by Foreign Minister Qiao Guanhua, who was walking arm in arm with a visiting African head of state. Deng descended a few steps and then stopped and looked back over his shoulder at the other guests, who, ignoring him, were still in animated conversation. Deng looked forward again and continued down the steps, his white socks flopping down around his ankles. He proceeded out the front door and off into the night. I was too intimidated to say anything to him, but recall thinking to myself, "Well, Deng may have been officially rehabilitated after the Cultural Revolution, but clearly he is not going to have much influence."

A particularly dramatic demonstration of political fear came toward the end of our trip, in a meeting in our Shanghai hotel with leading education officials of that city. We had brought to China a four-volume set of the *Handbook of Child Psychology*, intending to present it as a gift to child psychologists we met. Bill Kessen had lugged the heavy tomes with us from city to city. In each we asked to meet with child psychologists but were always told that none were available. (Visitors to China in those years became familiar with the *meiyou*, "there aren't any," syndrome.) Finally, in Shanghai, Kessen demanded that child psychologists be produced because he was not going to carry

the volumes back to the United States. Midway through the meeting, we were informed that two child psychologists, a man and a woman, had been found. They entered the room. Both were visibly quivering and, despite the mild temperature, sweating. From their appearance, we supposed that they might have been plucked out of a labor reform camp to come meet us. When we asked them what psychology theories they used, the man nervously responded that Marxism and class analysis were all they needed. Freud, Jung, and Piaget were irrelevant. They did take the four volumes off our hands, though, expressed thanks while looking down at the floor, and scurried out of the room. Ever since, I have puzzled over a simple question: What progress in Sino-American scholarly communication resulted from having two lonely child psychologists leafing through the *Handbook of Child Psychology* at night, after (as we imagined it) hard days of forced labor and mandatory thought reform?

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THIRD-WORLD STUDENTS IN CHINA

Donald Clarke

1977

In the fall of 1977, I got to know a number of African students at the Beijing Languages Institute (BLI). They were a very friendly group, but on whole seemed not terribly happy to be in China. The Ugandan students were particularly concerned because they had signed up for a degree program and had been told by the Ugandan Ministry of Education that that was what they were going to get, but on arriving in China discovered they would get only a diploma—not enough to qualify them for postgraduate studies anywhere. My diary entry from September 5, 1977, records the following:

African students have a completely different worldview from second-worlders. We would give our eye-teeth to be here; most of them wanted to go to Europe to study. They applied for foreign study and got sent to China. They study technical subjects for 4 or 5 years after 1 or 2 years at the Beijing Languages Institute. We are willing to put up with Chinese