

25. A MONTH IN CHINA, BEIJING, CHENGDU, GUANGDONG, 1981

Twenty-one years ago and just about the end of my tenure at Harvard, I was invited to lecture on population in China. There had been a switch from the Marxist dogma of Mao Tse-tung to just plain common sense. The subject of population growth was becoming a concern of the regime, after years in which people were urged to go the limit in childbearing. While I never pretended to help with lowering the birth rate, I could show that that a phenomenon of inertia existed, in which after a period of very high births there will be a further period of high births. This even though individual women limit themselves to as little as one child. The reason for the inertia – that is the persistence of the high births – is that the proportion of women of childbearing age is exceptionally large, a reflection of the high births of the previous generation. .

When I landed in Beijing I was introduced to a slim, athletic young lady that I will call Chang, who was to be my guide and interpreter for the month. An ex-swimming champion, speaking impeccable English, she bought the plane tickets, ordered meals, arranged hotel rooms.

Peking University in Beijing comes as close as any to be the national center of learning. I met the head of the Sociology Department (Yuan Fang?) and gave a lecture. In China scholarship and research go on in the universities AND the Academy of Sciences, in our case the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). It was the CASS, Chang's employer, which provided the interpreter service for my trip.

One feature of our travels was different from what I would have expected. That was the arrangement at each of the hotels where we stayed. There was a room for me, and a room for the interpreter, and beyond that for two men, to whom I was never introduced, but whose shadowy presence I observed at each stop. I can't believe that they were there to be sure there was no sex between me and Chang, but only to be sure that there was no conspiracy, no contact with dissidents, contact such as I had had without trouble in Moscow. When Chang came into my room at ten o'clock in the evening saying "Now Dr. Keyfitz, let us discuss your program for tomorrow," it was plain that she meant no more than just that. No use hoping for anything more.

One phenomenon shows the backwardness of parts of China. When I got up early one morning, and walked into a semi-rural area, I saw many of the characteristically long barrows pulled along by men, exuding a mild smell of night soil. In a way more environmentally favorable than our practice of washing it down the drains and ultimately into the streams and the ocean. What I saw was one phase of a cycle of food--offal--fertilizer--more food. But it is not necessarily a sign of poverty but of simple environmentalism. We have a little of the same--as an amateur gardener I have used organic in Toronto.

Early in my trip I asked Chang to arrange an interview with a peasant in his own cottage. I was surprised and disappointed by what I got. When the time came about ten of us filed into the tiny living room, myself and Chang, the village head and the local Party representative, another interpreter from my English to Chinese, just in case Chang had been corrupted so that through her I might preach treason to the Communist system, and several others whose purpose was not explained. (In a Communist system everybody is watching everyone else for signs of sedition, some professionally, most just as citizens.) With all that watching I gave up any hope of useful information, and had to be satisfied with asking when he planted, how much he planted, how much he used himself, and how much sold for cash.

When on a later occasion I again asked if I could see a peasant, Chang said "But Dr. Keyfitz you have already seen a peasant." Did I detect a twinkle in the eye? Was she pulling my leg? I will never know. In any case I gave up the idea of doing field work. In Indonesia disinterested observation was tolerated--though certainly not encouraged--but in China it was at that time impossible.

I should say that in my time, 1982, some small corners capitalism were beginning to be tolerated. At least farmers markets contained the seeds--free entry for buyers and sellers, price and quality competition. All the elements were there, especially individual plots of land, unlike the collective farms of the USSR. Since that time much larger chunks of the economy have been privatized, liberated from the straightjacket of Communism.

And there has been a dizzying expansion of the economy. About 8 per cent per year has been reported by calculations made abroad, a doubling every 9 years.

The Chinese seem to recognize that escape from Communism must be gradual; the Russians tried a shock therapy that threw the country into economic and political confusion. Yeltsin, in a coup d'état supplanted the far more business-like Gorbachev, gave away Russian resources to his cronies, and nearly 15 years after the end of the USSR prosperity is not yet in sight.