

A Reporter's Notebook: 8 Days in a Generation

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The following dispatch is by Max Frankel, chief of the Washington bureau of The New York Times.

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SHANGHAI, Monday, Feb. 28—The last glimpse of China for the American voyagers is through weary eyes. They felt the excitement of Marco Polo, but they had only days where he had years. To be precise, they had eight days to fill a hunger of decades—one day for every 100 million Chinese, most of whom were babies when Americans last strolled these streets.

The streets leave a drab memory—clean drabness, to be sure, and blue drabness when the people are milling

in the streets in their ultramarine suits, which is almost always. But how can you call anything drab that has so much life and so many lives and so many unknown ambitions and misfortunes and adventures and dreams?

The census bureau in Washington has now put the number of people in China at 850-million, give or take 50 million, and the life expectancy at 55 or 60, give or take five years.

Chairman Mao Tse-tung is

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defying all the figures, living now in his 79th year and insisting that the dream shall be only one: self-sufficiency or self-respect or constant revolution and equality, a pure and innocent collective spirit triumphant over ego, individualism and all the recorded experience of societies.

The people leave a disturbing memory, repeating the slogans of Chairman Mao and retreating behind the mask of political conformity. But the same mask makes them inordinately civil and hospitable and self-assured. They seem to believe that everything except political power and individual liberty is indeed their business, and they express themselves vigorously and cheerfully across the lines of rank whether the issue is how best to wrap up a package or how to carve a peacock-shaped radish at a banquet.

"What do the Chinese people laugh at, what jokes do they tell?" a visitor asks.

"You would not ask that question if we had not lost contact for 22 years."

"Perhaps. But humor can be different in different societies. We eat with forks, you with sticks. It does not make one better than the other."

"All right, what do you want to know about jokes?"

"Do men make jokes about women?"

"Yes," nods a man.

"No, never," says a woman.

"Do you make jokes about Chairman Mao?"

"No. He is a figure of respect and esteem for everyone."

"Do reporters make jokes about their editors?"

"Yes, of course."

"Do soldiers joke about their officers?"

"Yes, when it is not a time of serious work, or challenging the work of the collective."

"Then where do you draw the line between officers and editors and the Chairman and the Premier? Against whom can you joke?"

A table of gracious hosts maintained for the next 10 minutes that it could not understand such a silly question.

Inevitably, the memory drifts in China to Moscow. Peking took the worst from the Soviet capital architecturally even more than politically. It has rebelled against Soviet revisionism, against the incentive system there, against consumerism and against individualism. But not against the overbearing statism that makes the individual fearful of his neighbor and his government and makes him feel helpless against the sanctioned opinions of the majority.

The Russians live a vastly more comfortable life, and that concern for comfort is one source of the Chinese resentment against them. Chinese travelers to Moscow a decade ago recall young Russian men seeking illegal dollars in Moscow streets and Soviet children begging any kind of money out in the provinces. Since foreign money and beggars particularly were the dominant symbols of the miserable old days in China, the Chinese found it easy to believe Chairman Mao when he told them that the Russians were now on the road to capitalism.

But the coats and dresses in Shanghai are much more decisively tailored than those in Peking, and the people in Peking are said to admire the clothes in Shanghai. And the best Communist's idea of luxury is more color and more individuality in the dress of his daughter. Poverty does not easily admit to individuality and China is a very poor country and a crowded country. Whether Maoism can survive a new generation that does not remember what came before is the leading question now. Whether it can survive abundance will be the ques-

tion after that, if the idea is still around to be questioned.

There is no easy comparison with the Soviet Union because the Russian Revolution, besides being European and proletarian, is too remote for any living memory and has killed off a whole middle generation, between old Bolsheviks and young Communist leaders, which might have borne the memory of the bad old days and taught respect among the young for their parents, for authority.

"I understand philosophy, but computers are too complicated for me," President Nixon said to Premier Chou during a tour of Shanghai's industrial exhibition yesterday.

"I don't understand them either, but you have to pay attention to them," said the Premier.

"Books are better than TV," said the President moments later, apparently unconcerned about all the television cameras and correspondents he had brought to China to educate his people. "You can read five times as fast as you can listen to TV," he said. The Premier agreed.

"Art is my weakness," said the President, looking now at some art objects. He looked through a magnifying glass at a small piece of ivory the size of a rice grain bearing an engraved poem by Chairman Mao, "Ode to the Plum Blossom."

"Are women more intelligent than men?" asked the President of the Premier on seeing women technicians in the exhibits and advertising his question as "delicate."

"In the majority of work, what men can do, women can do," said the Premier. He pointed out that one of the interpreters assigned to the Nixon party could do her job so well because her husband performs more domestic chores than his wife.

"Be sure your husband doesn't stay home and look at TV," said the President to the interpreter.

At a dinner Saturday night in Hangchow, Mr. Nixon closed his toast to friendship with a tribute to that interpreter, Tang Wen-sheng. At the first mention of praise for her, the English interpreter for Premier Chou, Chang Fan-chih, jumped from her seat and hastened to the microphone. She was ready for the translation when the President finished, sparing her colleague the embarrassment of speaking well of herself on behalf of Mr. Nixon.

A few nights before that, the advance party of American security men in Hangchow sought out the pick-up team of Chinese security personnel for a game of basketball at a gymnasium near the guest house they were to guard. Cultural exchange was under way again. Everyone talked about not keeping score and just playing for the fun of it, but the points were counted anyway, and the Americans were leading at halftime. Suddenly, for the second half, there emerged three rather tall new Chinese security men on the host team. The hosts emerged victorious. 70-59.

"That's very dangerous," Mrs. Nixon said to Chang Hong, her fifth-grade student guide in an orange jumper, as she was being shown an exhibition of old-style sword play at the Shanghai Children's Palace today.

"Oh, that's not a real sword," said the assured 12-year-old.

As they moved on, with James Michener, the author, chronicling the tour on behalf of some of his colleagues in the weary press corps, Mrs. Nixon encountered large posters stressing that recreation also has a purpose in China. "Strive for progress, all boys and girls of China," one of them read.

"We study very hard in this place," said Chang Hong. "We learn everything we can and then go back to our schools and teach the others, as Chairman Mao told us."

Mrs. Nixon and the little girl moved on to hear a beginners' orchestra playing "Can She Bake A Cherry Pie, Billy Boy"—just as the People's Liberation Army band had played it for the Nixons in the Great Hall of the People in Peking last week. But an officious adult led the group on, into a dead end of the building's corridor.

"The children knew the way but the others got us lost," said Chang Hong to Mrs. Nixon, who kissed the girl.

Then there was a pig-tailed violinist of 13 offering "Turkey in the Straw," another of the Army band's selections for the Americans. And there was a dance drama of 8-year-olds, waving their little red books of the sayings of Chairman Mao and chanting tributes to him and "We must study hard to understand Communism because we will soon be responsible for the revolution."