THE OTHER CHINA

How Do We Know China? Let Us Count the Ways...

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On April 7, 1976, a *New York Times* editorial expressed an evidently startled reaction to recent rioting in Peking, for "China had seemed to be so orderly, so completely controlled in recent years...." The same day's mail brought to our address the February, 1976, issue of *Letters from Asia*, published in Hong Kong. The "letter" on China noted widespread strikes and disorders in 1974 and disruptive "factionalism" at all Party levels. The key line was: "...1975 was a highly agitated year in Chinese politics."

Having been broken in the traces of contemporary sinology, we are now accustomed to such moments of schizophrenia. Indeed, in our preceding two articles we have ourselves begun to render, in seeming schizoid fashion, a darkly shaded image of China in opposition to the prevailing evenly sunlit one. The irreconcilability of these images is astonishing. According to the commonly accepted one, China has finally and remarkably banished hunger by achieving sufficient production and equal distribution of food. According to the other, China has struggled in vain since 1949 to solve the unending food problem and at terrible cost; the major cities are more or less adequately supplied, while many peasants continue to go hungry.

Which image is the serious general reader to choose? And, more important, how would he know what to believe? The problem of "how to know" does not start with the reader, but with the scholar, or "expert." It is to him we may now turn expectantly, for the ways in which he goes about learning to know China affect the general knowledge.

His problems are not simple. China is not open to free inquiry, and information often flows from official sources in a murky blend of the esoteric, enigmatic, and the unreliable. He himself comes to his task with certain predispositions, which reflect theoretical, ideological, and cultural biases, even temperamental inclinations. The possibilities for different scholars to go awry in multiple directions are evident right off. In a sinological setting the proverbial blind men assemble to describe the elephant. Consensus about any aspect of China is, therefore, no guarantee of correctness; it may only indicate membership in a particular society of the blind.

Happily, despite the odds, many specialists on China manage to augment some aspect of knowledge; a few make major contributions; others, trapped by their own predispositions, wind up brilliantly wrong.

A talent for creative error is often honed by overadherence to a particular theory and methodology, for the latter tend to predetermine findings by selecting for attention those data they can best handle. In the process they direct attention away from data they cannot subserve and shape recalcitrant data to a more comfortable fit.

The study of China is further complicated by a fundamental anomaly: the Western mind trying to comprehend something outside its experience. There are at least two aspects to the problem. The first and lesser one originates from reducing a complex unknown to a convenient abstraction. Because we view China from a distance, losing sight of contradictory detail, we come to think of *one* generalized China. But China is a generic designation sheltering many Chinas both in and out of synchrony with each other. Geographical particularism is pronounced, and the past, despite all the changes wrought by the revolution, continues to exist in the present.

For example, the people of Kwangtung Province not only still exhibit deep feelings of separateness and a superiority over the North—meaning all China north of Kwangtung—but are now further set apart by a unique circumstance: the close presence and influence of Hong Kong. In a sense, Kwantung has become a satellite of that brilliant city; and the glow in the night sky, toward which the young escapers swim, extends across the province. Hong Kong, or "K City"—in current escapers' jargon—has heightened perception of an alternative missing elsewhere in China, becoming at once the locus and notion of freedom. It has even affected the way some young Cantonese talk: When close friends meet and part,

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it is the fashion now to say—instead of the traditional "Take care"—"See you in K City."

Assuredly this is not the China of the isolated interior, where the sky begins and stops at the outskirts of a village and where Mao himself seems to many simple peasants merely a remote emperor of still another dynasty.

A second aspect of the problem of comprehending Chinese experience is truly troublesome and involves Western thoughtways. Because we value logical construction in thought, we seek coherent explanations, in terms that make sense to us, for whatever mystifies us about China. We may be wide of the mark, but logic grows like a weed from a scant data-base. The final outgrowth is an all-encompassing theory with extrapolations that go well beyond the data at hand. This is the power of the Western mode—and the occupational characteristic of the Western scholar—but, in a novel context, also its danger. China, after all, is not physics.

Consider this example. A popular theory of agricultural productivity in China involves the notion that peasants have incentive to work harder toward communal production because they share in the resultant increase. Logical enough. In 1973, however, we elicited the reactions of recently escaped peasants from different provinces to this idea. The following are the responses of three peasants as they appear in the unedited interview protocols:

1. *A peasant from Chekiang Province*:

[Some correspondents who have visited China have been told by brigade leaders that peasants have incentive to work harder because they share in the surplus. Do you think working harder can improve your lot?] Impossible! [He laughs.]

[Why?] You just become more tired—that's the only result you'll see. Because what the land produces has to go to meet so many requirements. Actually, what each person gets is too little to make a difference....I can understand why a brigade leader would say that. He was talking to a foreigner and he didn't want the brigade or the country to lose face.

2. *A peasant from Fukien Province*:

[Some people say peasants get more if they work harder and the harvest is greater. Is this true?] Yes.

[So the peasants work harder?] Yes.

[Do peasants prefer to work harder on the private plot or on the commune land?] On the private plot.

[Why?] Because, after all the deductions [by the State, enumerated in preceding responses] a peasant would have little left over from work on the commune fields.

3. *A peasant from Kwangtung Province*:

[Some foreigners who have visited communes say that peasants want to work harder on the brigade land because the more they work, the more they get. Is this so?] It depends on which production brigade. For example, suppose in my brigade I get higher pay a day, then work will have more attraction. Say I get $1.50 [JMP] a day in my brigade. But in your brigade you get only 20-30¢ [JMP] a day. Then people in my brigade would vie with each other to work. People would refuse to take time off and they'd argue—why was he assigned work and not me? But in your brigade people would say: Better to chop firewood than work in the fields.

"The peasant's view also makes sense....Why have most scholars passed him by?"

It is already evident from the brief excerpts cited that new factors queer what had seemed a simple, logical view. These are, namely, the effects of State grain levies and the monetary value of the work point; and the peasant's consequent stress on the private plot. When asked routinely which vegetables were of better quality, those grown on the collective land or on his private plot, the normally phlegmatic peasant from Kwangtung above seemed flabbergasted by such an obvious question. "Of course, those you plant by yourself!" he replied. "It's different to work on collective land! When you work on your own, you put your whole heart in it....You take better care. But when you work on the collective land, you think things like, well— just pour some water on those vegetables over there."

The peasant's view also makes sense, the difference being that his logic is situationally rooted. Why have most scholars passed him by?

A look at the scholar's main sources of data on contemporary China is pertinent here.

Since field conditions for research as understood in the West are ruled out, direct access to the country is limited mainly to travel as permitted by the Chinese authorities. Travel notes are thus inevitably impressionistic, their value depending on the observer's background and perspicacity. Expertise may result in a "practiced eye," but some nonexperts have a true knack for capturing the "feel" of a place or spotting the telling feature in a mass of detail.

Not many have the flair, of course. An American actress, sometimes referred to in Hong Kong as "foolish sister," saw on her famed journey little but happy conformity, and singing and dancing children—the Chinese replay of "Thank you, Comrade Stalin, for our happy childhood." Amateur and professional theatre are an important and time-filling part of the China tour. Recently, a West German broadcaster performed an

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interesting experiment: he merely excised all the "song and dance" sequences from a routine documentary film he had received on the People's Republic. The shorn film seemed quiet and sad.

The real pitfall of "learning by seeing" China is that most travelers are unaware of the great investment and ingenuity that go into the creation of facades to impress the foreigner. In the extreme these take the form of showplaces which, from experience with like practice in the Soviet Union, must be termed Potemkin villages—so-called after the favorite of Catherine the Great who built idyllic facades along the provincial route his sovereign was to travel.

Potemkin villages are generally effective, partly because the end results are more credible to the outsider than the stage-managing required to produce them. It is hard to believe, for example, the degree of artifice involved in Chinese preparations for Richard Nixon's first visit in 1972, but these were manifest to great numbers of the population, whose cooperation was needed. Stories of the "complete show" arranged for the foreigners spread through several provinces with sometimes wistfully comic results. A peasant who was still in Fukien at the time related after his escape one year later that "it became a kind of fad—wherever Nixon and a large party of journalists went to visit, everyone had to stop using [ration] coupons in the shops. So people whose job it was to procure goods for local stores all flocked to the city on Nixon's route nearest to them. The procurer of goods from our county [Changlo] went to Shanghai, thinking this was his chance to get as much as he could to sell in Changlo. He also wanted to take a look at the Americans. But when he got there, he found that...all visitors from the countryside were put into Mao Tse-tung Thought Study Classes. He found people in those classes from all over the country. So he could neither get the goods nor see the Americans."

A former Foochow resident adds other pieces to the picture. From friends in Shanghai he learned that a few days before Nixon's arrival Shanghai became off-limits to all visitors except those with special permits. All municipal government organs, factories, schools, and street committees organized study groups....Specific regulations [were issued] as to who would or would not be allowed out on the streets. Those who were given freedom of movement were mostly Communist Party or Youth League members of the best class background with better education and cultured appearance....In those few days Shanghai department stores were stocked full of merchandise, from daily necessities to supplementary foods. Even carp could be found, reasonably priced, at fish markets. Some of my friends were assigned to 'buy' fish....Workers were sent to stores or markets to buy ducks, chicken, fish, pork, and eggs [in open view]...and then hand their purchases over to the local residents' committees, who would [later] return the merchandise. Then they would play the game over in some other spot...."

Canton made similar preparations in 1972. According to a young Cantonese, "one of the stops on the itinerary of a visiting American cultural group was the Haichu Market (on Haichu Road in the Yueh Hsiu District), the largest meat market in Canton. On the day the visitors were to arrive, large quantities of chickens, ducks, geese, fish, eggs, pork, etc. were trucked to the market by the export corporation, which specializes in exporting food to Hong Kong and foreign countries. At the time, meat was in short supply in Canton and each resident was allowed to buy only $1.50 [JMP] worth of meat a month....But when the Americans arrived, they found the market bustling and saw smiling people leaving it carrying chickens, ducks, and meat....After the Americans had left, these people—who were actually special personnel given money to pretend to buy—brought their food purchases back to the market, so that it could be trucked back to the export corporation. The food was, in fact, destined for Hong Kong...."

Such accounts, however consistent, evoke uneasiness in the outsider. His own experience accepts the thriving marketplace and rejects the shadowy stagehands creeping back to remove the props.

Other kinds of Potemkin villages succeed because the visitor himself willingly cooperates in the deception. He may be a sophisticate who wishes to believe in a more ordered, simpler world—in a "system," at least, which resolves the messy dilemma of human cross-purposes, so trying to him back home. Unfortunately, this has not much to do with China.

The scholar's major source of data is and must be the mass of published materials originating in China. If he is after primary data, however, he has quite a job cut out for himself.

From the Western viewpoint data must be apolitical in order to be objective. But in China data can never be bald; politics is always "in command." A consequence of this purposeful bias is that straightforward reading yields devious information. Experience and skill are required to read between the lines and extract the code embedded in the language. Analysis based on meticulous study of the materials available over a period of time can sift the probably true from the spurious, while adding surely to knowledge.

An illustration of some analytic techniques involved is provided by the February 7, 1976, issue of *China News Analysis (CNA)*. Reporting a 1975 year-end headline in the *People's Daily*—OUR COUNTRY'S AGRICULTURE HAS ONCE AGAIN HAD AN OVERALL BUMPER HARVEST—*CNA* comments:

> The impression given is that every province of China has had an excellent harvest—an impossibility in such a vast country, with such divergent geographical and climatic conditions.
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> This is however the impression received in the Western world by people who read headlines only and not small print and in this way the myth about the miracles of China has filled the world....
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> The small print shows a different state of things: "This year [1975] 20 of the provinces, cities [i.e., the counties under the jurisdiction of Peking, Shanghai, and Tientsin], and autonomous areas had bumper harvests"....

A bit of arithmetic further shows that, excluding the three cities, 17 out of 26 provinces and autonomous areas were therefore purported to have fared well. Of the 17, only 9 provinces were actually listed by name.

Kiangsu Province was named as one of the best-producing provinces. But in August, 1975, the Kiangsu People's Broadcasting Station, monitored by *CNA*, had spoken of dangerous conditions in the province, because of torrential rains, and reported floods in two counties. In December the same station had revealed that "autumn sowing of wheat has been difficult on account of uninterrupted rains."

In the unlisted provinces of Hupei, Kwangsi, and Anhui provincial radio had indicated serious water damage to crops during 1975. One report mentioned 200,000 *mou* (1 *mou* = about 1/6 acre) of flooded land in Anhui. According to another report, the Anhui Provincial Party Committee said that "35 million *mou* sown for autumn crops were menaced by continuous rains and ordered an emergency harvest lest the crops rot."

> In August foreign travellers learnt that the rail link between Peking and Canton had been cut by floods since the beginning of August. Later the foreign office spokesman admitted that serious flooding had occurred in Honan province.

CNA finally concludes: "All that one knows is that one does not know how agricultural production in China fared in 1975."

The quest for precise information exemplified above is to a degree atheoretical and proceeds as far as resources permit. But the scholar inspired by a particular theory tends not to press too hard for data that may confound it. If the theory yields certain consistencies, it is said to constitute explanation, thus obviating any search for data beyond the minimal.

Even at his most conscientious and insightful the scholar working with published materials at a distance needs some way of touching down to the human scene. He has to remind himself that, when he speaks of China, he is always speaking of the Chinese, not of theoretical constructions on a grand scale that somehow operate apart from them. It is here that people with Chinese life experience must be drawn into the research process.

Since involvement of Chinese in research is impossible within the People's Republic, it has to take place beyond its borders, wherever refugees and legal emigrants are found. The process referred to is the systematic interview.

There has been growing acceptance in sinology of the refugee as a research resource. He is more, however, than a supplier of additional information. Through him the texture of life can be restored to data extracted from impersonal sources, and the facts of daily existence get to be seen through Chinese eyes, invested with Chinese meanings, even summoned into being because he perceives them to be there. In this way the wholesale use of logic to generate data is brought under control, and theory has to withstand severer tests than mere rationality and consistency with a scattering of data preselected by outsiders as important.

The value of these face-to-face encounters depends on the interviewer's art and a willingness to allow the individual before him to break through the format of the interview and escape entrapment within some predetermined category. The uniqueness of individual experience is important in contributing understanding and is not merely the disposable wrapper of some deeper generality. Unfortunately, it is a Western scholarly habit to favor determination of the general and to dismiss the unique—the essence of the person—as a deviation somehow from an abstractly projected norm. As we shall see, such a predilection underlies some of the uneasiness that scholars feel about the refugee interview.

There are two reasons commonly offered for rejecting the refugee as a serious research asset: He is unrepresentative and necessarily biased *because* he escaped. The first objection is ostensibly grounded on statistical notions; the second has to do with the quality of evidence.

These are by now stereotyped objections that seem reasonable enough. But do they stand up under empirically based analysis?

In declaring refugees to be unrepresentative, the objector usually assumes that for everyone who has escaped there are tens of thousands who have not made the effort, presumably because they are content to live within the system. Refugees are therefore to be viewed as an aberrant minuscule of the whole population. The assumption errs in assigning equiprobabilities of escape to people apart from geography and other factors. It is based, further, on too simplistic a notion of what motivates a person to leave his family and native land. People do not just decide to pack up their ideological discontent and cross the border, The decision to escape is a personally focused one in which ideological alienation may play no role whatever, except in retrospective invention. Even the malcontent tend to leave only when life has brought them to an impasse without possibility of a tolerable resolution.

"On the mainland, my value was equal to 5 cents out of a dollar," said a refugee last year in Hong Kong who had been hounded in Canton because of his father's Kuomintang background. "In Hong Kong I'm valued at 100 cents, so why shouldn't I have risked it? If the political authorities [back home] had made me feel worth 90 cents, I might not have escaped."

People who are not out of ideological harmony with their surroundings may also reach an impasse. A Kwangtung peasant of favored poor-peasant background, interviewed in 1974 in Hong Kong, was basically sympathetic toward the Communist program and considered that life in his commune was better of late than during previous years. As his thirtieth birthday neared, however, he began to take stock of himself: He was still unmarried and "couldn't even clear 10 cents [in cash] a year," since he earned only "30-40¢ in a workday." Progress was slow indeed. "Water seeks a lower level," he explained through an adage, "but people look to a higher level." He decided to escape to Hong Kong before he became too old.

The idea of representativeness is also confused with

the statistical concept of a "representative sample." Refugees who do not "constitute a representative sample" seem stranded beyond the bourn of scientific respectability.

Technically, a representative sample doesn't represent anything; it is a sample randomly selected from a homogeneous population in the statistical sense. It is then hoped that knowledge gained from study of that sample can, with a stipulated degree of confidence, be extrapolated to the larger population from which it was randomly drawn. If heterogeneity is entertained—and the Chinese are a heterogeneous people—the representative sample must also be stratified—a risky business in the absence of empirical information on the nature of the heterogeneity.

It is doubtful that all scholars who object to refugees as unrepresentative have the statistics of sampling in mind. Some probably mean, rather, that these people in the flesh cannot possibly correspond to any of the Chinese, whom they have conceptualized as abstract units peopling an abstract landscape called China.

Actually, it is time for this whole academic pack of cards to go flying into the air. The fact is that there is no way to constitute a representative sample outside of China, nor is one necessary in order to gain data and understanding.

There is a less mechanistic way of proceeding, which has been utilized in the social and psychological sciences: this is exploration of individuals *in depth* over a sufficient *range* of experiences. The lack of a representative sample, for instance, did not prevent Freud from acquiring generalized insights into ordinary as well as neurotic behavior. For him the important thing was work in depth with troubled persons and coverage of a sufficient range of the neuroses.

This method also confronts and significantly transforms the problem of "bias," which is commonly held to disqualify the Chinese refugee as a proper research subject. Oddly enough, the same scholars who reject the refugee because he is "biased" are not deterred by the patent bias of the impersonal materials they rely upon for data. Nor are they deterred by their own theoretical and cultural biases. They assume, or hope, that their methods cope with these. The bias of an individual is, of course, different from that of a document, and the notion has become semantically confused so as to mean either "prejudice" or "deviation from some norm," but often both at once. Even if we accept such definitions, uncritically for the moment, there is no reason why all "scientific" method should buckle before the problem.

The danger lies in deciding what that bias is in advance. The scholar who discounts the refugee as deviant from some norm presumes to know already what that norm is—an act of omniscience. But "bias" is not a deviation from some ineffable "truth" known in advance. It is the mark of a valid experience, an inseparable feature of any individual case study and part of the whole data pool. Rather than seek to expel it as a pollutant, method must encompass it and proceed differently to adjust for error.

Generalization becomes possible as the details of numerous in-depth individual interviews accumulate and begin to mesh in unsuspected ways. The Chinese refugee, like any person, is always a subtle and varied amalgam of what is unique to him (his "bias") and what he shares in common with others (his compatriots back home). In endless ways he continues to resonate within the context of his past.

The persistence of past context in the present is sometimes strikingly illustrated. A fisherman from Hainan Island responded to a routine question about his class background back home by sticking one thumb in the air—the sign for "No. 1." "The very best!" he said. "Poor peasant!" The fisherman was still occupying his proud niche in the Maoist social hierarchy—but the interview took place in Taipei.

"On the mainland, my value was equal to 5 cents out of a dollar," said a refugee last year.... "In Hong Kong I'm valued at 100 cents, so why shouldn't I have risked it? If the...authorities...had made me feel worth 90 cents, I might not have escaped."

The building up of sufficient context to permit understanding by the outsider is one of the advantages of the "in-depth" approach. It is close to the ways in which we gain insight in everyday life and is the substance of literary art. A British film of some years ago, *Brief Encounter*, begins with an apparently uneventful scene at a railway station, as a stranger might glimpse it between a cup of coffee and a dash for the train. A man and woman exchange a few words, are interrupted; the man leaves to take his train home. A long flashback ensues culminating in the same scene at the station. The few words spoken are now locked in tension, the trivial interruption is cruel, an anguished woman watches her lover walk off forever. The viewer no longer stands outside the scene.

Correction for factual and analytic error in the "in-depth" interviewing method proceeds through constant crosschecking of minute detail within the data being gathered and against the available documentary evidence. The method has its limitations, like all methods, and must operate in concert with other traditional research procedures for optimal results. There are necessarily many collaborative ways of learning to know China—that vast and complex country. This is one of them.