The Chinese surprise

The Americans Are Coming!

Donald Kirk

The Americans are coming—not merely statesmen and diplomats, not just occasional journalists or teams of scholars or family planners or whatever, but almost anyone with enough money to pay for the privilege and accept some of the nuisance of guided tourism through the People's Republic of China. They jostle for space outside the panda pens of the Peking zoo, madly clicking cameras and shouting greetings at one another. They troop through the courts of the Forbidden City and the Summer Palace, mingling with grinning off-duty People's Liberation Army soldiers and hordes of uniformed schoolchildren. They crowd the orchestras of theatres and concert halls, applauding newly revived "revolutionary" operas and dances, often with more spontaneous verve than do the respectfully restrained Chinese around them.

The spectacle of Americans in garish, multicolored dress swirling through the lobbies of Peking's half-dozen hotels for foreigners provides a startling contrast to the normal sight of Mao-suited Chinese bicycling methodically along broad avenues or crowding sidewalks through districts in which tourists until this year were distinct rarities. The Fifth National People's Congress was in full swing in early March when the first batches of American "friends" with no special professional or political affiliations began arriving. By the end of December some fifteen thousand of them had made the tour—a minuscule figure by the standards of virtually any other nation, but a great leap from the total of three thousand American visitors in 1977.

Nor are the Americans alone in availing themselves of the new policy. Increasing numbers of Europeans, Japanese, and overseas Chinese are also wandering through schools and communes, sipping tea with "typical families," and shopping for sometimes dubious bargains at Friendship stores in major cities. The striking lesson of the American invasion, though, is that it signaled what soon became a fair accompli—"normalization" of diplomatic relations between the two countries despite Washington's refusal to abandon entirely its commitment to the "Nationalist" Chinese regime on Taiwan. For the Chinese as well as the Americans, the "opening of China" means bending rules even while hewing to old forms.

The most dramatic—and immediate—reason for China's new outlook has been the protracted struggle to compensate for a decade of social and economic turmoil before Mao Tse-tung's death on September 9, 1976. Emphasizing economic rather than ideological ends, the Chinese made plain in their welcome to the Americans that they were much too busy with their own problems to risk what could turn into a long and nasty fight to wrest Taiwan from the "Nationalist" forces. Then, too, the presence of forty-three divisions of Russian troops strung along the four thousand-mile Sino-Soviet frontier raised the proverbial specter of "war on two fronts" should the Chinese ever decide to send an expeditionary force across the ninety-mile-wide strait separating the mainland from Formosa, the island encompassing the "province" of Taiwan. Russian forces, with modern aircraft, artillery, and tanks, could penetrate quickly and easily, especially if China's planes, most of them outdated imitations of old Soviet MIGs, were diverted elsewhere.

Recognition of the hard realities in Peking in turn gave American negotiators the confidence that they could yield to the Chinese on their three central bargaining points. The Americans were already cutting the U.S. military contingent on Taiwan down to six hundred men, almost all communications experts or advisors, and had let it be known that they were willing to pull out the rest. The U.S. also had very few qualms about breaking off the security pact that still binds the Nationalist government to Washington and, finally, transferring diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Peking, all in keeping with the communiqué signed by President Nixon and Premier Chou En-Lai in Shanghai in February, 1972.

Sweeping though such concessions might appear, they did not exactly strip Taiwan of its last source of support. The enclave to which the defeated Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek fled with his followers in 1949 now manufactures most of its own arms and ammunition—and can still purchase sophisticated electronic equipment from American companies or other Western suppliers. American business, moreover, could presumably trade and

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manufacture products in Taiwan, as Japanese firms have been doing ever since Japan switched recognition from the Nationalist to the Communist government soon after the Nixon visit. The U.S., like Japan, will protect its considerable interests in Taiwan through an office dealing with economic and cultural affairs.

The Chinese, to be sure, are not likely to assent publicly to American involvement in Taiwan on any level. For that reason National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, in his three-day visit to China in May, dwelt on what his aides persist in calling "global issues" in an effort to appeal to Chinese concerns that may override what Chinese leaders invariably call the "internal problem" of Taiwan. "The Chinese could have written the script for him," said one disgruntled State Department hand after Brzezinski at a farewell banquet in Peking twitted "efforts by others" (read the Soviet Union) "to seek a monolithic world." In the face of diplomatic fears of provoking the Kremlin, Brzezinski's first visit to China seemed to justify the new openness of the Chinese toward Americans. Called the "polar bear tamer" by his hosts for his anti-Russian jokes on the Great Wall, he added substance to statements by persuading the administration on his return to reverse the Commerce Department's refusal to sell China a high-altitude infrared petroleum sensor of dual use in detecting submarines. Still more vital to the Chinese, the U.S. has indicated it would not oppose the sale to China of military technology by its allies, notably France and Britain.

The formula for rapprochement, then, undoubtedly lay in China's uncanny ability to ignore certain facts while emphasizing others. The Chinese had made no secret of their disappointment with Secretary of State Cyrus Vance's visit in August, 1977 ("nothing new," was the most charitable summation), but chose under any circumstances to open the door to Americans long before Brzezinski had any notion of going there to inject "something new" into the dialogue. Advised that American journalists still could not join package tours, this correspondent identified himself as "writer" on the application and was accepted into a group without question. The new attitude was manifest well in advance of our arrival in Peking, when a tall engineer in Maoist garb genially chatted with us on the plane from Bucharest about his visit to industrial complexes in West Germany and Austria. On the bus into Peking from the airport a young guide assured us, "We are your friends, you are our friends," and expressed the hope that our visit would "increase the friendship between our peoples."

China's propensity for putting up with elaborate exercises in face and form without totally abandoning old claims reflects to some degree the interaction of its two most powerful leaders, Mao's titular successor, Party Chairman and Premier Hua Kuo-feng, and Deputy Premier Teng Hsiao-ping. Ever since the Fifth Congress the two have been alternating as speakers at national conferences—the one emphasizing ideology and revolution, the other reform and recovery from the havoc created by the "Gang of Four" radicals who attempted to seize power during Mao's final illness and immediately after his death. Hua revived the Maoism, "Let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend," in urging intellectual discourse, but Teng has been largely responsible for making certain the sentiment lasts longer than did Mao's short-lived "100 flowers" campaign of 1956. It is Teng who has actually engineered the new outlook, subtly deemphasizing the importance of Mao as a God-figure, calling for study and research with a minimum of empty sloganeering, reviving stiff examinations for admittance to universities, and encouraging a general atmosphere of relative freedom.

On a nonstructured level as well, the Chinese convey a sense of warmth and ease that adds depth to the verbiage. One evening, on a shopping street near the Forbidden City, a young Chinese asked if he could show me the way—and pointed proudly at shops peddling herbs, canned food and beer, cheap coats and trousers, all more readily available now than a year ago. "We are changing," he said, lapsing into a defense of his country's latest drive to "catch up" and atone for old wrongs. "Before it was hard to suggest increasing production. Now we can talk about it." An interpreter for a government agency, he claimed he was no longer afraid to talk with foreigners in his off-hours. "Nobody minds," he said as shoppers glanced curiously at us in the gathering darkness. He declined, however, invitations for dinner or even tea. "If we eat alone with you," he said, "we are suspect."

That stricture too may fade as Teng presses the campaign for rehabilitating China's "persecuted intellectuals" (his term), downgraded, pilloried, and sometimes imprisoned or transferred to menial posts in distant regions during the Cultural Revolution. Himself twice purged by radicals, Teng at seventy-four seems willing to let Hua, who is fifty-nine and Mao's one-time protégé, hold the key titles in the interests of unity—and of getting things done. At a national science conference in Peking in March he said angrily that China's contributions in technology were "highly incommensurate with the position of a socialist country like ours" and asked: "Will factually pointing out this backwardness make people lose heart?" Research directors, he added, should have "a free hand in the work of science and technology," while party committees, previously the instruments of anti-intellectual radicals, should "back up the work" of the experts.

Counterbalancing this obvious rebuke of ideologues, Hua in his own speech at the conference placed the need for learning in a much broader context—that of firing "the enthusiasm of the masses of people for studying new things and building a new world," all "by comprehensively and correctly implementing Chairman Mao's revolutionary line." China-watchers are divided on whether Hua was implicitly rebuking Teng for omitting that kind of traditional appeal or deftly providing an ideological base for the new pragmatism. At any rate, Teng in his next major address, this one at a conference of educators, put on a valiant show of ideological concern. Repeatedly alluding to Mao, he invoked Mao's
remark that a student's "main task is to study," but conveniently overlooked the rest of the thought—that schooling should be shortened and students should come from worker, peasant, or military background. Judicial editing of the late chairman's words seemed altogether warranted in this case, since the government had just lengthened college education from three to four years for those, regardless of class origins, capable of passing the requirements.

The Chinese are anxious that foreigners appreciate the shift in educational emphasis. One morning a busload of us was herded off to Nanking University, whose fifteen thousand students attend seven colleges ranging from science and engineering to liberal arts. There the university secretary, Chou Sung-shan, and his aides not only briefed us on the history of the institution, built by American missionaries, but sent us off to an English class to converse individually with three or four students. The session provided an extraordinary opportunity to ask questions about the changes that had swept the campuses since they were reopened in 1972 after six years of Cultural Revolution. Students cited the entrance exam as proof of determination to raise standards but did not mention the opposition posed by those selected under the old system of choosing candidates on the basis of revolutionary zeal and hard work in communes or factories after their graduation from middle school. They preferred to observe that library stacks were now open, that new books in English were available—and that lately they had begun singing an American song, "We Shall Overcome."

Although the Chinese never referred to Mao with less than total respect in any of our conversations, students and teachers hinted at de-Maoification by their neglect to mention his works as a topic for formal study. Professors in particular talked instead of the humiliations heaped upon them by the policies of the "Gang of Four," notably Mao's widow, Chiang Ch'ing, who denounced intellectuals as "stinking knives" and "enemies" of the class struggle. "We were the most suppressed," said Professor Lo Chang, chairman of Nanking University's languages department. "Students could oppose us on anything." It is in order to train—rather than to excite real intellectual curiosity—that China now is reverting to conventional techniques. None of the teachers dared speculate on what would happen to one who inculcated serious academic skepticism. For most of them it is enough to get still better clues to the new mood from operas and dance performances, whether revivals of "pre-1966" revolutionary works banned during the Cultural Revolution or new productions with titles like "Unforgettable 1976" or "Flames in the Storm," both of which deal with the struggle against the "Gang of Four." One group of Americans chanced to attend the première in the southern port city of Kwangchow (still known in the West as Canton) of an operetta in which a young actor in a long gown played the role of a youthful Mao Tsetung talking to students some fifty years ago. A ripple of whispered comments ran through the theatre as the actor appeared and a chorus sang Mao's lines. The significance of the event lay not in the words themselves but in the fact that Mao had never before been a character on stage except in silhouette form. The tourists had unwittingly witnessed another effort at "humanizing" the God-figure.

Such happenings epitomize the spirit of change that China wants to impress on all its visitors, ranging from senior citizens with time and pensions on their hands to senior statesmen with briefcases full of messages and memoranda. Over a multicourse lunch proffered us from the produce of nearby barns and fields at Shanghai County's Hong Giao (Red Bridge) commune, Yang Sha-long, vice director of the local revolutionary committee, blamed the iniquitous "Gang" for having forced his vegetable-growing farmers to plant rice in an unrealistic scheme for self-sufficiency. "Previously the cadres did not have the courage to talk about production," Yang said. "If they did, they knew the 'Gang of Four' would criticize them." Now, he assured me, "we are changing back to growing only vegetables." In an industrialized suburb of Shanghai a newlywed couple averred that people influenced by the "four bandits" had thrown rocks through the windows of some of the apartment buildings, but the couple now seemed certain "our system has changed for the better." Downtown, we watched children dance through a skit that symbolized the advantages of breeding chickens "the modern way."

It is as if the sights on the itinerary were display cases to prove the nation's ability to carry out the aims enunciated by Chairman Hua before the Fifth Congress, when he declared that China should become "a modern, powerful socialist country by the end of the century." Hua's talk was the frankest revelation so far of his government's plan, drafted in 1975 but blockaded by the radicals. Each year between now and 1985, he said, agricultural output should increase between 4 per cent and 5 per cent, and industrial production goes up 10 per cent annually. He confidently
predicted “at least 85 per cent mechanization in all major processes of farmwork,” plus construction of a heavy industry competing “in the world’s front ranks.” Chinese officials claim that overall output has increased sharply this year, but deliberately avoid hard figures. Western economists believe the gross national product is likely to exceed the vaguely estimated 1976 figure of $305 billion, most of it recorded before Mao’s death and the debilitating quarrel with the radicals substantially lowered production.

In the face of Chinese optimism, however, foreign diplomats in Peking are convinced that Hua has set hopelessly lofty long-term goals for an economy still mired by customs and work habits firmly set centuries ago. “There are many villages where there’s no motorized transport,” one diplomat pointed out to me after he had gone on a series of trips around the country. “You still see men hauling carts with two wheels, so to produce 85 per cent mechanization against whatever it is now would be an immense task.” A train ride across more than a thousand miles of the richest farmland between Peking and Shanghai exposes the poverty in which live the vast majority of the populace. A tractor is a rare sight on fields tilled by men and women wielding hoes or guiding tillers pulled by mules and donkeys. Mud-walled villages flash by as workers with picks and shovels wait patiently by dusty, unpaved roads. “Getting these people to work is a big problem,” said a foreigner living in Peking, “Inertia and boredom are chronic.”

With increasing frequency, however, Chinese are letting foreigners visit secondary cities or remote areas in which any perceptive observer could get a sense of some of the problems. Once almost isolated, the dozen or so American diplomats assigned to the U.S. Liaison office, the channel through which China and the United States conduct relations in Peking until the U.S. withdraws from Taiwan, now obtain appointments and permission to travel almost as easily as do members of regular embassies. As a trading partner the U.S. will not rival Japan, which signed an eight-year $20 billion trade agreement with China last spring, but it should rank sixth or seventh among China’s trading partners in 1978 with exports and imports of $700 million, nearly double that of 1977. (That figure hardly compares, of course, with the 1977 trade between Taiwan and the U.S. of approximately $5 billion.)

Superficially, the prospect of “getting into China,” as businessmen sometimes rather crudely put it, dazzles the imagination with visions of untold riches from a “China trade” reminiscent of the free wheeling era of nineteenth-century imperialism. Historically, a legion of overnight experts has discovered, China has gone through periods of convulsion followed by spells of calm. “First there is the picture of marauding Red Guards, of China in rampage,” said one of the Americans who accompanied Brzezinski to Peking, “and then emerges the image of the practical Chinese and the feeling that ‘at last they will be just like us.’” In the final analysis, he suggested, “the problem in understanding China is explaining these two faces.” For the Chinese nation, he said, the problem remains much the same as it has been for more than a century—that of modernizing and still maintaining its distinctiveness. “In each era in which China has moved to expand contacts,” he concluded, “an internal debate ensues as to the risks of these contacts.”

Nowadays China’s leaders coexist under a working compromise in which they allow the freedom needed to progress, but little more. If Chinese can listen to Western symphonies again and line up on the streets once more to buy movie tickets, they still cannot absorb “decadent” pop songs or films or any other fare that might show doubts about the system. If the government has proclaimed a constitution that guarantees real trials by people’s courts, the penalties are still as harsh as ever for those who defy authority. Reports indicate two series of killings in 1977 and 1978—first in Kunming, capital of Yunnan province bordering Vietnam, then in Peking and other industrial centers. In some cases, notably those in Peking, officials have explained that they were doing away with rapists and thieves. In others the intent surely was to “reeducate” those who remained loyal to the “Gang of Four”—some of whom were putting up posters defending them. “The new leadership is always talking about law and order just as it talks about freedom,” said one of Peking’s Western residents.

Fear of military attack helps explain the seeming paradox: Teng, talking last June at the first national political conference of the People’s Liberation Army since its victory over Chiang Kai-shek nearly twenty-nine years ago, skillfully put over the new thinking. “We must at no time violate the basic principles of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tse-tung thought,” he said, again deemphasizing Mao by placing him third among equals rather than alone as the embodiment of Marxism-Leninism. “We must integrate them with reality, analyze and study actual conditions, and solve practical problems,” he went on, warning that “times have changed, conditions have changed,” and “methods of solving problems have to change too.” The inference was clear. Old-line advocates of Mao’s concept of “people’s war” fought with basic infantry weapons had better realize the urgent need to modernize swiftly and begin to close the growing gap in technology and hardware between Chinese and Soviet forces.

In a time of peril, then, the Chinese if anything need American sympathy and expertise as much as the Americans need Chinese friendship. The senior guide on my tour, Wang Lien-yi, a veteran of fourteen years as escort to British visitors, displayed a masterly tact that won over the Americans with barely a hint of hard-sell. Wang’s favorite weapon was tongue-in-cheek repartee, as when one of the Americans loudly asked if the huge red characters over a building in Shanghai meant, “Drink Coca-Cola,” and he replied, with a sly smile, “Idea-logical pollution.” In his farewell at the airport Wang left no doubt of the diplomatic import of his work. “I call you dear friends,” he said amid applause. “Remember me to your family” (more applause). Then he quoted, not a Maoism, but “an old saying” from a previous era: “Two separate mountains can never meet; two people can.”