

# A MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

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Of the roughly 7.5 billion people who now inhabit our planet, approximately 60 percent of them live in the countries of Asia. This vast continent is rich in history, cultures, resources, and wisdom. It is, moreover, an immense landscape of staggering ethnic and geographic diversity. Millions of people go about their lives in venerable, time-worn ways, while many others are busily engaged in transforming virtually every aspect of the physical and social landscape around them. Like every other continent, though, Asia has its share of turmoil, problems, failings, and challenges. In this issue, several area experts offer glimpses into the complex picture that is Asia. We hope that readers will find these essays both interesting and illuminating.

Certainly, I do not pretend to be an expert in any aspect of Asia, but I have now been twice to Taiwan, birthplace of my wife, including the trip in 2002 for our very successful ATWS conference. In May of 2016, I went to the People's Republic of China (PRC) for a second time, and I made yet a third trip in October of last year. Between my initial trip to the mainland and my latest was a hiatus of about seventeen years. The first trip occurred between June 16 and July 13 of 1999. During that trip I kept a journal, which I unearthed just before we left for our May sojourn. I carried it with me on my two trips to the PRC last year and added some thoughts and observations. What follows is a summary of my reflections from these three trips to the fascinating country that is still an enigma to most Americans, the PRC. (I would include myself in this category, so any views or opinions expressed are those of a layperson.) I will quote extensively from my 1999 journal entries since the details would otherwise be rather hazy in my mind. My interpolations, with observations and musings, will be marked off in brackets.

**Shanghai, PRC. Wednesday, June 16, 1999 at 11:00 pm.** To the four of us [including my wife, Shu-hui, daughter, Katrien, and son, Jan] it is 11 am. We set

out for China on Tuesday morning at about 5:30 am and we have just gotten into our hotel room, some 29 and a half hours later. Coming in from the airport in the dark and the rain, I was struck only by how reminiscent of American cities is Shanghai, but for the fact that signs and billboards are in Chinese. We plan to be here for only two nights, to recuperate, and then move on to Nanjing, probably by train. ["Jing" refers to a capital, a former capital in this case.]

**Shanghai, Friday, June 18, 9:35 am.** We are rested and getting ready for our day now, the first for me in China. It is gloomy and rainy, but ten floors below is a general busy-ness, the bustle of people and the constant honking of car horns.

**Nanjing, Sunday, June 20.** Yesterday we visited the site of the burial of the thirteen Ming Emperors. It is a beautiful area in the low-lying mountains around Nanjing. They are heavily wooded and very pretty. The place is filled with impressive monuments and buildings and temples dating back to the fourteenth century. Also located there is the burial place of Sun Yat-Sen. Nanjing is a prettier city than Shanghai and the people seem friendlier, though initially we had a very harrowing experience. We booked our travel by train and found out later that tourists seem not to travel by this method. We wondered why until we began our journey. First, it was almost impossible to get to the train station though it was only about two blocks away from the hotel. We almost missed our train.

Then when we arrived in Nanjing, we were dropped off across the tracks from the station with no apparent means to cross over the tracks with our heavy luggage. A crowd began to enclose us and stared in a menacing way. Shu went off for help while Katrien, Jan, and I were left to guard our luggage and ourselves. For a time I fully expected that people would begin grabbing at us or our belongings. Then Shu returned with a "red cap"—a train station official—who was able to extricate us. [This crowd was surely curious about us and made no attempt to disguise this fact; Westerners were not a common sight back then.]

During the train trip itself, however, it was interesting to see the countryside. On both sides lay almost a continuous series of rice paddies, with some gardens, aquaculture, homes, and towns. Construction, industry, and dump sites were mixed uneasily with these farms. In the rice paddies toiled farmers in their age-old ways, I suppose, bent over planting individual rice plants. I even saw a farmer plowing with a water buffalo.

We are now staying in a two bedroom guest apartment for Johns Hopkins students who are studying Chinese and China. Outside our window is a scene

in stark contrast to that of the countryside described above. Immediately across the street is an active construction site, a gaping pit upon which another tall building will undoubtedly be erected. The sign of a Holiday Inn protrudes over another building. We are on a corner where broad avenues intersect and from our fourth floor apartment traffic seems more orderly than in Shanghai. But it is still daunting to be a pedestrian crossing the streets here. They apparently rank low in status, behind the taxis, which constitute about 75 percent of the motorized vehicles. There are buses, trucks, and a few private cars, and then a large volume of bicycles and motor-cycles. All of these have priority over pedestrians, I think.

**Tuesday morning, June 22.** Yesterday, we went to a small lake in the southwest quadrant of the city. I found the experience strange. We pay wherever we go, even to visit a city park. There we found old buildings, once beautiful, withering from neglect and juxtaposed with recent park additions—tacky versions of rabbits and Donald Duck. [I wondered] if the Chinese no longer distinguish between the things of value in their cultural heritage and the tawdriest offerings of modernity. We paid for a brief motorboat trip across the lake to the shore where we caught a bus the rest of the way to the city zoo. It was the hot part of the day and the zoo is a modest affair, hardly worth the trip. There was, however, one exception: the red pandas there, which I never even knew existed. They are beautiful creatures! They were munching on bamboo leaves.

Today there is a pervasive haze over the city. I don't know if it is natural or man-made. It is thick enough to obscure the sun entirely. I've begun to think that the chaos on the streets below, where pedestrians are never given a chance to cross without some lanes of traffic crossing their paths, reflects in a deep sense the socio-cultural chaos of post-Cultural Revolution China. To a surprising degree it seems that the C.R. was able to produce a deracinated generation. And without the traditional anchor of religion or (more broadly) spirituality, which had long been a part of the Chinese heritage, materialism has ostensibly taken a fierce hold. It is easy to see why American foreign policy—reflecting the interests of multinational corporations—steadfastly presses for closer ties with China. Leaving aside questions about the environment and ecology, the market potential here is clearly enormous.

**Nanjing, Thursday, June 24.** This is the second day of gloom and rain. Despite the weather, we ventured out yesterday to the museum housed in the former Ming Palace. It is said to be China's second best museum—after the one

in Beijing. There is an extensive collection of art and artifacts dating back some three millennia. But the museum and its treasures are kept so informally! Attendants stand throughout, but the building itself is far from secure, even though some of the items must be priceless. There is a full, mummified prince in a suit of jade armor sewn together with silver thread. There are clocks encrusted with diamonds, rubies, and emeralds, protected only by a rope to keep sightseers out of touching range. There is no climate control. [That is, I was shocked at how informal and bare were the conditions in a museum housing such invaluable relics.]

**Fuzhou, Saturday, June 26.** We flew to Fuzhou and feel lucky to have arrived safely. The flight was quite an experience. Though we had four seats assigned to us—in a row—after boarding we discovered that there are no seat numbers. As we took off, smoke came billowing up from the floor into our faces, apparently from the air conditioning system. [Other than us, no one seemed alarmed at all.] We continue to be objects of curiosity. People walk right up to us and simply stare with their mouths open. One man even watched us through a telescope in the airport gift shop, just about ten to twelve yards from where we sat.

On Sunday, we took a city bus to a nearby mountain, which has Buddhist temples. On the rocks surrounding a temple we saw calligraphy carvings dating back to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, during the Ming Dynasty. [I was, of course, fortunate to have a scholar of Chinese history with me, my wife, at all times to explain what we were seeing and the significance of it.]

**Xiamen (Amoy), July 2–3.** [This day, I was moved to write that] China is an enigma—a land of contrasts, extremes, and contradictions. And it is a country in the midst of rapid change. [Nor could I get over] the chaos of traffic; people walking across streets anywhere and with vehicles rushing past them incessantly. They dodge cars and trucks like a Spanish matador evading the bull. There seem to be no traffic rules at all, except to try to avoid a head-on collision.

[On our first night] we went to supper at the hotel restaurant on the fourth floor and found there a crowd assembled for a wedding and dinner. [My wife, Shu] managed to get us seated at a table on the fringe of the group. So we got to watch as the bride and groom were announced, entered, and married. The marriage ceremony . . . was completed in less than a minute. There is apparently little involved in a purely secular Chinese wedding. Shu told me that a couple is considered married if they declare themselves so before several witnesses. The bride wore a conventional white, Western-style wedding dress.

People clapped for them and toasted the couple with wine. Most peculiar to me, during the wedding dinner they played music over an intercom system—Jingle Bells and O Holy Night! And this was a June wedding.

People in uniforms are ubiquitous. I can't tell what they all are, but some look like army, others like city police, various and sundry security people. This morning as we left our hotel we were observed by two national security officers, the Chinese equivalent of CIA. We don't know why, [but] we believe our luggage has been searched either during our flight or when we were out of the hotel.

[I then listed some of the sights and impressions that had struck me.] The [vast multitude of] poor or modest income Chinese riding their bicycles and talking on cell phones; trucks hauling everything everywhere: pigs, fish, vegetables, rebar, stones, bamboo, paper, glass, etc., etc. Trucks of every size and shape surround us. A nation of shop-keepers—row upon row of grimy little shops selling foodstuffs, or clothing, jewelry, Chinese medicines, Buddhist relics, tires, water pumps, shoes, tapes and CDs, plywood, motorcycles, and more. Venerable and verdant mountains framing the landscape, with large boulders protruding. Rice paddies and ponds full of geese and ducks destined for market. Old buildings with beautiful, traditional Chinese architecture surrounded by modern buildings with no apparent style. Thousands and thousands of buildings under construction everywhere. Smells assaulting us—from strange foods being cooked, unknown fruits, urine on the walls beside the sidewalks, decaying fish, etc. A water buffalo being used to plow; I see them tethered in the fields with ropes leading to their noses. Banyan trees hundreds of years old; lychee, date, bamboo, and banzai trees; the locust tree where the last Ming Emperor hanged himself when a peasant revolt resulted in his palace being breached.

**Xiamen Airport, July 4.** [As we got ready to board our flight to Beijing] I have had what I believe is a sort of epiphany about Chinese society: to govern a society this large and diverse with a modicum of harmony requires a system finely attuned. All over China the rules are applied strictly; but their interpretation differs all over China. [Years after I wrote this in my journal, I discovered this gem from Lao-tzu: "Govern a great country as you would cook a small fish."] Thus produced is a system providing both unity and flexibility. However, for the traveler, it produces bewilderment and frustration.

**Beijing, July 5–13.** [I found that Beijing lacked much of the flavor and charm I had experienced in Nanjing, particularly. I commented on its]

pervasive drabness. Certainly, little of the Chinese character or heritage has been in evidence. Everywhere one sees row upon row of buildings in the same mold, rectangular blocks stood upright without any frills. Here, aesthetics is not being allowed to detract from utility. Though there are some glittering shopping areas, one must walk through mud puddles to reach them. Frequently, there are no sidewalks at all, and cars and taxis splash past the pedestrians, who are expected to yield to all vehicles.

[On our first full day in the city] we went to Tiananmen Square and the adjoining Forbidden City. [At the Square, we saw] the large building with the great star atop it, which serves as headquarters for the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. Most ironically, directly across from and facing it is a McDonalds! I wonder if the Central Committee members ever send out for lunch—Big Macs all around.

The Forbidden City [residence of the Emperors and their families from about 1420 until the end of the Qing Dynasty in 1912] is an imposing, massive, and extensive edifice—or actually a complex of edifices. Each gate leads to another palace. [It now houses the Palace Museum, the most visited museum in the world. It is full of beautiful and amazing treasures of Chinese history. But many of the works of art were removed by the fleeing Kuomintang at the end of the Chinese Civil War and are now found in the National Palace Museum in Taipei, Taiwan.]

Today [July 8] we went to the Summer Palace, which has a beautiful lake, gardens, walks, and—of course—a fabulous palace. And we followed up with a trip to Yuanming, built by the Qing Emperor with marble stone carvings sent to him by the Pope in the 1750s. The French and British burned it in the 1860s and it has since lay in rubble. It is astonishing and sad to see how these beautiful carved marble stones lie about in disarray with the Chinese climbing all over them and taking photos. [I opined that the Chinese were not demonstrating sufficient concern or care for their rich history and cultural heritage.]

[At one point in my journal, I complained that] everything is so difficult to get to and find. This country has not developed any sense of accommodating the tourists. Few people speak English . . . [and] everything is under renovation. And crossing a busy intersection is perilous. Signs may indicate the exit and the entrance with arrows pointing in the same direction. [T]here are rules for absolutely everything. They are extensive, totally arbitrary, inefficient, and

usually deal with minutiae. At the same time there is absolute chaos. The rules are different everywhere and are ignored by the denizens when it is to their advantage. For instance, I have observed that one of the rules of traffic is to drive on the right side—unless that is inconvenient.

The super-abundance of labor [in China] is also evident. In stores and restaurants, frequently there are more clerks and waitresses than customers. This tends to make service pretty good here, though again inefficiencies sift in. China organizes its [government] departments by industries and each of these departments runs its own hotels, etc. for traveling employees. The hotel where briefly we stayed was such a hotel, run by the department that oversees the tobacco industry. These have ties with US tobacco companies . . . [and] the government here apparently encourages cigarette smoking. It is everywhere here. Smokers have priority. To mention the rights of non-smokers would be ludicrous.

There is only one bank in China that can exchange foreign currency or cash traveler's checks: the Bank of China. First, we had to find a branch office, not an easy task. Then it took an hour to cash the [traveler's] checks. The people acted as if they had never seen traveler's checks before. They kept making phone calls, reading the checks, looking at my passport, studying my signature—and repeating the process over and over. I was compelled to sign the checks no fewer than three times each, including my passport number on each check! Personal checks are worthless in China. Charge cards are accepted almost nowhere. Even US dollars must be exchanged at the one particular bank.

Yesterday [Sunday, July 11] when we saw the dragonflies hovering at the level of our heads, Shu said it meant that we were in for rain. [It did indeed rain the next morning.] Our Western meteorologists would have predicted rain on the basis of scientific evidence; but here was a reminder that careful observation of Nature is also a source of information and knowledge. In the West . . . we tend often to look past or through Nature. We ignore—even shun—its lessons and we are often doing so at great expense to our environment. Moreover, our disconnection from Nature has had harmful psychological effects, for example deluding us into thinking we are apart from and above Nature rather than an integral part of Nature, critically dependent on it.

[In my last 1999 entry I remarked on an indelible image from the Beijing airport] where the “environmentally conscious” Chinese set aside a room for

smokers. They also set aside a room for “mothers and babies.” The only problem is that these were the same room!! Smokers and mothers and babies were supposed to share the same room at the Beijing airport. Ah well, China—the enigma and the contradiction. . . . It was an interesting trip.

From this point, excerpts from my 2016 travel journal will be in quotation marks.

In 2016, Shu-hui and I made two trips to China. In May we went to Beijing, Xi’an (formerly known as Chang’an, the longtime capital of China), and Hangzhou. Shu had lectures to give at Beijing Normal University; I had a conference to attend and a presentation and lecture at Northwest University in Xi’an. In October, we went to Hong Kong, Guangzhou (where Shu delivered lectures), Guilin, and Beihai. The contrast with China of 1999 was astonishing. The country, though recognizable and possessing the same essential character, has been transformed. All of that frenetic activity I noted back in 1999 had, indeed, culminated in fundamental changes, most of them—in my estimation—quite positive.

As one might expect, China is a lush mix of the traditional and the modern. The cities have gleaming hotels and many avant-garde buildings; shops abound with consumer items and amenities; great restaurants and food are everywhere; and public transportation is very accessible. I particularly enjoyed the “bullet trains” between cities, which provided panoramas of China old and new while we sat comfortably at the windows. “Signs of affluence and ostentation are everywhere.” Making an international phone call, cashing a traveler’s check, exchanging currency: these tasks are no longer troublesome at all.

China is yet in large part a world of poor farmers and workers going about their lives in small villages surrounded by verdant farmlands lovingly tended, waterways, and duck ponds, stitched together by dirt roads upon which people travel by bicycles and scooters and animal-drawn carts. But it is also a world of grand cities with millions of people living in high rise apartments overlooking streets brimming with vehicles. “Traffic is [still] terrifying. One thing that hasn’t changed—cars have the right of way and pedestrians have no rights.”

The young people sport fashion that one might find on the streets of Los Angeles or New York. I saw T-shirts with “Hilfiger,” “Get Wild,” “The Revolution will not be Broadcast” (thanks to Gil Scott-Heron), and (yes) even “US



Army.” In my May journal I noted that “the young man who translated and helped me around Xi’an is a professed admirer of American culture, though he has not yet traveled to the United States he has watched many US television shows and movies, and his favorite rapper is Eminem.”

“At the conference [in Xi’an], everyone was very courteous and cordial to me, but I heard some scholars express rather anti-American attitudes. One was blatantly conspiratorial, arguing that the United States might be secretly backing ISIS! I guess the United States does not have a monopoly on conspiracy theories in this age of globalization.” However, I did not hear anyone suggest that President Xi Jinping had been born in Kenya. I delivered a lecture to a class of graduate students, and I found them to be extraordinarily intellectually curious.

Wherever one looks, whether at the traditional or the modern face of the country, and these are frequently intertwined, one sees constant industry and activity. “There is a kinetic energy in the air here.” The Chinese are still on the move. “Nevertheless, a walk up the street to the train station clearly revealed the old China beneath the burnish. The street is full of small shops with dirt-caked windows, dusty products for sale on display in them. Electrical wiring, old masonry, ancient paint, sales people with mobile carts, workers cleaning the street with straw brooms. . . . No country this large can be transformed fully in a couple of decades, but China’s transformation is palpable and impressive.”

I could go on, but the reader will be relieved to know that I am bringing my reminiscences to a close. I want to conclude my observations on China with this passage from my journal: “These two [a professor and a student who served as translators and guides for me during my sojourn in Xi’an] watched over me and helped me throughout my stay. They were tirelessly gracious and welcoming. Indeed, everyone I met was friendly and warm toward me. I’ve been so impressed by these people who have seemingly boundless good will toward a stranger from America. It makes me wonder why there cannot be unadulterated friendship between our two countries. The Chinese are every bit as hard working and noble as Americans, and probably a good deal more hospitable to their guests. I’ve been greatly impressed.”

Of course, the world is a complicated place and we have entered a new period of flux and uncertainty. The current president of the United States has found excuses to question old alliances—as with NATO, Germany, Australia,

and France—while warming up to autocrats in Russia and the Philippines. He has harshly criticized China (during the campaign), then praised China (as he looked for help with the problem of North Korea), and is now criticizing China again. His withdrawal from global initiatives like the Paris (climate) Accord and the Trans-Pacific Agreement have opened the door wide for China, India, and Asia in general to fill a vacuum and amplify their roles on the global stage.

There are more refugees in the world today than ever before, nearly sixty-six million. Famine, cholera, and other old foes of humankind are resurgent. It is therefore a particularly unfortunate moment for the richest country in the world to adopt a self-absorbed “America first” policy, when this sea of humanity is in such dire need of compassion and help.

Nevertheless, I hope that the essays in this issue of our journal will illuminate and spark greater interest in, and a more nuanced understanding of, some aspects of the world around us. Moreover, I believe that the better we understand each other, the less likely it is that we will find reasons for quarrel or to engage in acts of injustice against one another.



My travel partners back in 1999: Shu-hui, Jan, and Katrien.