

Relevance and Benefits of Seminar

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a trip such as this is worth a billion, or should I say 1.5 billion words? Experiencing what China is like, albeit in a cursory way, is of immense benefit to my own intellectual development and to the development of my ideas about the texts on China which we will use in the IDCC core course. Though the core course texts of Chinese origin are primarily religious texts (*Chuang Tzu's Basic Writings, Confucian Analects, Books of Mencius, and Journey to the West*) and of little or no interest to the current PRC government and its people, the themes embedded in the texts are still relevant to issues with which contemporary Chinese are trying to deal. Had I not travelled to China and experienced the relevancy of these issues on a first hand basis my awareness of the saliency of the themes embedded in the texts would not have been as acute. For example, both the Taoist and the Confucian texts deal with the issue of creating or maintaining order in the midst of chaos. Though Taoists and Confucians differ as to how this order can be achieved, both agree that it is an issue. Taoists believe each individual must balance his or her internal chaos so that order may be created within the individual. This individual order will then create a center of balance from which more order will emanate. This aim is to dissipate or dissolve external chaos and disorder. Conversely, Confucians believe each individual must sacrifice their own needs to those of superiors in the family or in the state. By focussing on the needs of one's superiors, Confucians believe social order will be created. As mentioned above, no self-respecting citizen of the PRC will admit that Confucian or Taoist principles are

relevant to today's non-feudal society. Yet, during our visit, in the lectures at Universities and in discussions with faculty members, guides, and government officials, it became clear that many of these same principles applied. For instance, during one of the events scheduled for the 70th Anniversary of the Communist Party, Mr. Li explained "why it was so important to incorporate minorities into the celebration." I have italicized the phrases and words he used which incorporate some of the same themes Confucians and Taoists espoused.

If we don't acknowledge that they are part of our system, then they won't want to *sacrifice their individual needs* for our Party. Then, we'll have no *order*. Every minority will only think of themselves, like in the Soviet Union. There they have *pure chaos, no order*. With democracy such as theirs, there is no recognition of the *balance* and relationship between the central government and the provinces. Here, with our minorities, we have that. We have *balance, order, and harmony*.

Whether or not our guide was speaking informally about the political situation, or we were hearing formal lectures about the Chinese Legal System, the Educational System, or the Arts, these themes of balance, order, and harmony were predominant. Though it is possible to read articles which emphasize this same point, such articles do not have such an overwhelming and visceral impact as experiencing such emphasis first hand.

In addition to highlighting the salient themes of interest to Chinese before and after the revolution, first hand experience allows one to dispell the pre- and misconceived notions about China and its people which may stem from readings about the area. Several of these misconceptions dispelled by my visit are now crucial to my understanding of China. For instance, much of what I read prior to going to China about the Cultural Revolution and its Aftermath led me to believe that even though the cultural revolution had attempted to eradicate the traditions of feudal society and its concomitant religious beliefs, the

aftermath had allowed such beliefs to flourish once more. My experience in China, however, left me with a much different impression. The government was in the process of restoring Taoist and Buddhist temples, but this appeared to be more for the sake of tourism and to appease minority interests, than to be something that the government condoned for the majority of its peoples. My initial impression crystallized one I stopped in a Buddhist temple in Hong Kong and saw how strikingly different it was. The Hong Kong temple, built by refugees from the People's Republic of China, was filled with incense sticks offering prayers to the gods or to ancestors. Smoke permeated the room and enshrouded the crowds of devotees, suppliants and priests. Louis Schwartz and I were the only tourists and were barely visible amidst the throngs of people absorbed in their ritual acts. Such an experience was a marked contrast to the sterile, virtually empty tourist galleries named temples by the PRC government. In addition to temple visits, many experiences, including the way in which we Americans were segregated into hotels, eating establishments and train compartments apart from the average person on the street, recalled more of the Maoist xenophobia and leftover policies of the Cultural Revolution than books and articles about the PRC had indicated. Though several Americans did tell me that much of this xenophobia was renewed after the Tiananmen Square incident, the fact is it is impossible to know how pervasive and resilient such attitudes are in Chinese culture unless one experiences them first hand. Truly, a visit such as this is worth a billion words.

#### Structure of Visit

Though many of my colleagues continually complained about the extended stay in Kunming, I thought this was one of the best parts of [REDACTED]

the trip. Not only were we able to experience how a typical provincial capital with its universities, minorities, celebrations, and political intrigues operates, we also were able to see how a peripheral town incorporates ideas from Beijing. The classic literature on China by Immanuel Wallerstein and William Skinner posits an idealized segregation between the central capital, Beijing, and remote provincial areas, such as Kunming. In this classic literature, it is supposed that remote areas on the periphery are slow to incorporate ideas and practices which enter the nation from external, international sources. By contrast, however, our experience showed us that Kunming, its faculty, its guides, and its people, were much more Westernized and less acquiescent to Beijing's dictums than we would have believed. Though many of my colleagues continued to grouse about Kunming's remote status in the country, if they had opened their eyes and dropped their preconceived notions about "the provinces," they might have reassessed some of their ideas about how international and non-Chinese culture enters communities such as Kunming. In fact, it is these peripheral communities which often are the most critical of central governments, and often the most innovative and forward-looking. In my view, this certainly was the case with Kunming and thus it served as an interesting and educational counterpoint to the more staid cities on the Eastern Coast of China. It will be interesting to watch China in the next few years and see whether or not peripheral communities such as Kunming act as points of origin for democratic reform.

In sum, it was through my stay in Kunming, that I began to rethink the classic theories about innovation and change. Such rethinking is not only relevant to the courses I will teach about China, but relevant to any political context in the world. Certainly, with results such as

these, no one whose interests are educational and not merely touristic, can complain about extended stays in communities like Kunming.

#### Recommendations for Further Faculty Seminars

One element of the seminars which could benefit from improvement is the pre-trip meetings and/or reading list. Though the Spence book on *The Search for Modern China* and *The Basic Handbook: on The People's Republic of China* were helpful, in some respects they were paradoxically too overwhelmingly detailed and too general for them to be of much benefit. Moreover, the University lectures in China (as most in-country lectures) were not as beneficial as they could be for many reasons. One reason, was the lecturers had to leave much unstated and implied, and another reason was we were not well versed in the issues or concerns about which these people lectured. Therefore, it was difficult to interpret the implied from their statements. To alleviate this problem for faculty seminars of the future, we need to read and study before we go to the country. If for instance, we are to hear lectures on ethnicity, music, politics, and history, it would be helpful to read a series of very specific readings on these topics prior to departure. These readings should represent several approaches to understanding the issues speakers might raise in lectures. Then discussion at lectures or afterwards in the privacy of our own group could greatly enhance the learning process.

The question is, however, how do we get these articles together? I know you asked people to suggest readings on China. Probably very few people did so. In my case, I kept compiling articles and books on China I thought would be of interest, but never had the time, nor the impetus to consolidate them for myself and my colleagues. We all have good

intentions, but are often too busy to fulfill our goals. So that this doesn't happen in future seminars it might be best to find out the topics which will be covered in lectures and then ask three or four people to compile articles about these topics. The articles can then be photocopied at the print shop for the faculty seminar. For instance, for the Africa seminar, Louis Tremaine, Carol Summer, and myself, would be appropriate people to ask to do this over the Winter Break. A compiled book could then be sent over to the Print Shop by Spring Break and handed out soon afterwards. Then in May, before the trip, a few days could be devoted to discussion of the various articles under specific topics. If the "book" is not too heavy, it would then be a valuable item to carry along to Africa for reference.

One other suggestion for further trips might be to schedule "reading time" once faculty members arrive in country. I found the China trip rather overwhelming in that I had very little unscheduled time to read and reflect on the experience. Most of us, being academics and bookish, need such reading time to renew ourselves. Structured time allotted for such endeavors would help everyone involved get more, rather than less, out of the experience.

In general, despite these minor suggestions for improvement, my view of the whole experience is extremely positive. I have already used the knowledge I gained from the seminar to enhance my classes and I'm sure I will continue to do so. It is with seminars such as these, that UR distinguishes itself as an institution truly devoted to the enrichment of the faculty and thus the teaching process itself. I cannot think of any more rewarding and enlightening use of funds than this. Please continue!!