CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE CHINA SYNDROME

VERY LITTLE has been known about what was really going on inside China all those years. The U.S. would not recognize China, and so couldn't establish diplomatic or journalistic listening posts. Without diplomatic entrée, even covert intelligence gathering was restricted. Much of the information the U.S. relied on came from biased sources among the anti-communist Chinese who reentered China for their own purposes.

What was *thought* about the Chinese then is so untrue today that one wonders how true it ever could have been. For a quarter century, encompassing the Korean and Vietnam wars, available books and articles and snatches of television film footage showed us a billion brainwashed automatons. Any Chinese, plucked from the crowd, halted on his bicycle, would faithfully parrot the current opinions of his leaders. He would not only accept, but extol the government's design for his life. As for his own preferences, he denied he had any.

The Chinese we saw all worked and played with industrious, single-minded devotion to their revolution. City or village, they were all skilled at rice growing, factory working, and, above all, soldiering. They were prepared to march—even run screaming in suicidal charges—at any enemy their leaders pointed out. They had no feelings, no independent reason, and no human specialness. They loved Big Brother—and nobody else.

We were shown Nazi-like schools where individuality was methodically snuffed out of the kids. Row upon row of scrubbed, beaming, youngsters chanted and exercised in unison, as if they had been stamped out by some

great oriental cookie-cutter. Asian fortunes appeared bleak.

From the stories one hears Chinese tell now about the years of the Cultural Revolution, and from what Westerners who visited China during those years say, this image seems built around a grain of truth, but only a grain. The zeal with which the Chinese supposedly did the crazy things they were told to do was always largely fiction. Now, even the grain of truth is gone from the automaton image. The Chinese communists achieved a Stalinist control of bodies, but not an Orwellian control of minds.

The Cultural Revolution lasted from 1965 until it tapered off in the mid-1970s. In other words, it coincided almost precisely with the expansion in U.S. force on China's southern border. It came with the U.S. combat troops, and wound down as the troops were pulled out and the South Vietnamese government fell.

Obviously the U.S. intervention wasn't the sole cause of the Cultural Revolution. You could even argue that the corresponding dates are a coincidence. Strange bees had always had a propensity for getting into Mao's bonnet—witness the ludicrously unsuccessful Hundred Flowers and Great Leap Forward campaigns earlier. But to the extent that the exercise of U.S. power had any inlfuence at all on Chinese policy (and surely it had some), we can say this: the more the U.S. applied military force, the more China behaved the opposite of the way we wished; and as the military force was withdrawn, the more China began behaving the way we wished. With the Yankees licked, and their national pride no longer threatened, the Chinese began to think of the U.S. in terms of the marketplace and their self-interest. Suddenly we were valuable, to be catered to.

Today the myth of the Yellow Peril stands exposed. China really does invade Vietnam—feeling threatened by a country it perceives as a Soviet ally—and gets *beat*. It tries to help guerrillas in Cambodia and gets beat again by Vietnam. Apparently China has even less success controlling its southern neighbor than the U.S. has controlling Cuba.

And while the Chinese people are still afraid to speak out directly against their government, they say enough to establish their hatred for the Cultural Revolution and their unhappiness with many policies of the current leaders. In fact, what they approve most about the government of Deng Xiaoping and Zhao Ziyang are its tentative steps toward restoring a marketplace economy.

OF all countries, China invites comparison most to Cuba. They are the two successful communist revolutions of our era that have had a chance to show what they can do. Whatever the similarity in the original rhetoric of those revolutions, the tone and mood of the two countries are now worlds apart.

With China, the United States has made its accommodation. With Cuba, it hasn't. Yet if most Americans could travel through them, see what life is like, and learn all the rules, the preference would clearly be the other way

around. Neither China nor Cuba would strike most Americans today as a desirable place to live. But if forced to choose one or the other as a home, most would find the choice easy.

A comparison could be stated thus: In the United States, people can do almost anything they would normally want to do without asking permission of the government. In Cuba, they would have to ask permission, but the government would usually say yes. In China, they needn't bother asking, because the government would almost always say no, and then denounce them for thinking of it.

What follows is a look at the China we went to war against, and what happened there when we lost.

SHEN MINGHE wanted to be an architect. When he qualified to go to college, the government put him in a political science course. Upon his graduation, it told him, to his complete surprise, that he would be working for the *People's Daily*, a newspaper. That was almost twenty years ago. He is still at *People's Daily*, in a job roughly comparable to deputy foreign editor on a major U.S. newspaper. But he is obviously being groomed for advancement, next, perhaps, a job covering the U.N. in New York.

In 1968, a few years after being surprised by his assignment to *People's Daily*, Shen got an even bigger surprise. He and the other editors were given a week to pack a small box of belongings, and were shipped out to cadre school in Yan'an, in Shaanxi province near Inner Mongolia. Shen's wife and small son stayed home in Beijing, about 420 miles east of Yan'an.

Over the next three years, Shen was part of the Cultural Revolution. He saw his family twice, for three or four days each time. He worked in the fields of Shaanxi, planting vegetables. All the other "intellectuals" on the *People's Daily* were also shipped out around the country to plant vegetables, or perform similar labor. The newspaper was run by university students.

Shen says he doesn't know how well the students did at his job, because he was forbidden to read, or even listen to the radio. This was Mao's idea of seeing how the other half lived. Shen plainly preferred his own half. Twice, he was caught listening to a radio in bed at night. He unabashedly admits he preferred the programs of Voice of America and the British Broadcasting Corporation to anything Chinese. He was reported and scolded in public, but not punished further, he says.

Three years doesn't seem like an oppressively long time in retrospect—compared to fifteen or twenty years in the Gulag Archipelago, for example. But in the madness that must have been China then, no one, least of all Shen in his remote cadre school, knew when, if ever, normality would be restored. Finally, the cabinet minister who controlled the *People's Daily* "fell"—was fired—and just as suddenly as they had left, everyone was invited back to his old job, with a month's vacation to boot.

Shen still won't try to explain these reversals of policy. The government

hasn't yet determined the official history of that period, and so the people of China must wait to see how roundly they can condemn the Cultural Revolution or reject Mao's thoughts. It's clear, though, that Shen would be hard-pressed to endorse or defend what happened. He was miserable, and who can blame him?

You hear similar stories all over China. Most statues of Mao have been taken down, and visits to his mausoleum have been restricted to a few odd hours a week.

CONSTRUCTION on the Sichuan Number One Textile and Dye Factory began in 1958. In 1959, amid the confusion of the Great Leap Forward, when everyone was supposed to go smelt steel in his backyard, construction stopped. In 1961, The Great Leap having fallen flat on its face, construction started again. In 1962, it stopped again, for reasons no one can recall, but, in 1964, it started again.

In 1966, the textile part of the plant finally opened for business. A few months later, in December of that year, it closed because of a dispute between two groups of workers. According to Wu Xinming, the administrative assistant to the director of the plant, who is the highest authority you can get to, the dispute was this:

"Both [factions] considered themselves as being leftist. One was really rightist. One faction [the real leftists] considered that although the leaders may have made some mistakes, they were still good cadres. The other faction, the rightists, suffered the influence of Lin Piao [former defense minister, very close to Mao]. They said that all the leaders of the plant were capitalist roaders. This group made a lot of excuses. They tried to deceive workers in the plant to follow them."

Finally, in May 1967, everyone managed to get the plant started again. But this was "the tense period of struggles between the two factions." Wu says there was no substantive issue relating to pay, work rules, or manufacturing procedures. "The only thing they wanted was to get power," he says. "They sabotaged the production of the plant to win the support of the Central Committee [by making it look like management was doing a bad job]."

In July 1968, the rebels—the radical rightists who were only pretending to be radical leftists—took over. Production declined. "They ordered people to stop working whenever they wanted, to use the workers' time to carry out the mass movement to criticize the capitalist roaders," Wu says. "To those who worked very hard, they said, 'You only know how to work, you don't know the direction.' They said cadres who increased production were hurting the revolution. High producers were following the capitalist solution, they were not revolutionaries."

In 1974, the plant was closed again for five months, because it was considered necessary to take time out to criticize Lin Piao (who died in 1971) and Confucious (who died in 479 B.C.). In 1976, the plant was closed for

two months to allow time to criticize Deng Xiaoping, who is still alive, and in fact one year later, in 1977, bounced back from his criticism to become head of the Chinese government. The 1976 work stoppage proved to be the swan song for the rebel managers, however. Soon afterward, the Gang of Four fell, which obviously required new management at the textile and dye factory.

According to Wu, about $55 million of production was lost during the three work stoppages caused by the Cultural Revolution. Finally, in 1977, the plant for the first time surpassed $40 million in production, which was the annual production rate when it opened.

It took the Chinese eight years to build the plant, and nineteen years to get it into full production, during which time Chiang Kai-shek and Son had turned Taiwan—formerly China's poorest province—into one of the world's leading textile producers. Taiwan's per capita income (1978) is $1,300; China's (1979) is $232. Statistics can be misleading, but anyone who travels through can see that the standard of living on Taiwan is much higher in every visible respect, at every level of society. Of course, it's common knowledge that China has had a tougher time of it than Taiwan, because China is more overcrowded. But common knowledge is wrong. Taiwan has about two-tenths of an acre of arable land for every person. China has about three-tenths of an acre.

Wu's explanation for this discrepancy is stunning. "Taiwan relied on international investment from the United States and Japan," he says. That, of course, begs the question. China could have had all the Western and Japanese investment it wanted, but chose to reject that and go its own way. For the Chinese to say now that Taiwan outstripped them because it dealt with the West is an enormous concession.

China's government has pulled back the ideological bolt that barred it from the world marketplace, and has even opened the door the tiniest of cracks. It is filling the airwaves with English lessons (sometimes they are the only programs on television).

In many ways, China's history is a cycle of openings and closings to the outside. There is always the lure of material advances, followed by the threat of internal disruption, and then the clampdown. How do you let in things and keep out thoughts? The emperors never learned. The current government is searching for a way to admit technological ideas while filtering out other ideas.

But much of the very technology China wants to bring in involves communications advances that make the other ideas harder to keep out. If the door ever really opens, the U.S. will have won with its economy a victory far more significant than the one that keeps eluding the U.S. military on Asian battlefields. As an investment, money is cheaper and more productive than blood.

* * *

MEANWHILE, Sichuan Number One Textile and Dye Factory seems to be on a straighter track. Its production rose steadily to about $130 million worth of cloth in 1981. Of course, those are management's figures, and since this management accuses prior management of falsifying its figures, and the prior management accused the one before it, we can't take anything for granted.

Whatever the output, though, 11,700 workers are required to achieve it, which Wu readily admits is "a terribly low production rate." Most of the equipment was built in China in the 1950s, and is, Wu says, "very backward." In addition, he says, "We have a lot of youngsters working here to solve the unemployment problem of China." The staff continues to grow. Once a worker starts at a factory, he doesn't quit. In July 1980, the plant began giving workers two days off, instead of one, after every six days worked.

The workers earn an average of $25.40 a month base pay, plus an average of $5.40 in bonuses if they exceed quotas. They also get housing for only $2.70 a month, including utilities, and free medical care and schooling. But housing is so overcrowded as to make Cuba's look capacious by comparison. (The Chinese language doesn't even have a word for *privacy*; in Beijing, a university-trained engineer lives with his wife and two children in one 12-by-15-foot room, the same one he has occupied for seventeen years.) And medical and preschool care frequently appear to be perfunctory, nowhere near the equivalent of Cuba's.

China's reputation for strange and wonderful medical advancements appears to be yet another myth—acupuncture notwithstanding—at least as far as delivery to the average person is concerned. At one communal clinic not meant for foreigners to see, there are dirty floors, peeling paint, a shabby tile ceiling that is coming apart, stagnant pools of water in the yard, and flies everywhere. There is one dentist for more than 10,000 people in the commune. "It's not like in your country where you go to see dentists two times a year," the dentist says. There are said to be four doctors and a paramedic, but only one doctor seems to be available on the day of a visit.

SICHUAN Number One Textile and Dye Factory is a model workplace, the best of several dozen in Sichuan province. That is why foreigners are allowed—in fact, encouraged—to see it. The other factories admittedly don't approach it for size, modernity, or efficiency. Yet only about 10 percent of the workers are wearing masks in rooms swirling with cotton lint. Asked about byssinosis, or brown-lung disease—a big issue at U.S. textile plants—Wu says, "Chinese people don't get that." Pressed, he explains that the Chinese have invented a medicine, made of pig's blood, that clears the lungs of cotton dust. Every worker takes it twice a week, he says.

The first worker a reporter approaches says she doesn't take any such medicine. She talks as if she never heard of it. Wu comes over and is told she doesn't take the medicine. The worker gets a frightened look on her

face, and begins insisting that she takes the medicine every day. A second worker is approached in another area, and exactly the same thing happens. Management must have some concern, because no one is allowed to work in the lint-filled part of the plant past age forty.

Cotton cloth is rationed in China, along with rice and a lot of other things. There is a shortage.

YOU get up a couple of hours before your guides so you can lose them. You hop a bus headed to some distant town that contains a tourist attraction foreigners are authorized to visit (that way, there are fewer questions from the ticket-seller). About halfway to the destination, you get off at a random stop out in the country, where foreigners aren't expected to go. You ride a horse-cart as far as 25 cents will take you, slog more than an hour through rice paddies stepping around water buffalo and ruining shoes, and finally come upon what appears, after a half dozen similar excursions, to be a typical village.*

The houses, from prerevolutionary days, are of mud blocks. They have dirt floors and thatched roofs, but compounds are spacious. A lot of brick

*Always taking along an American interpreter fluent in Mandarin. If anyone from the Chinese government is around, even an interpreter, you have given the game away before starting. I am indebted to Laurie Cohen, then a journalism student at Columbia University and now a reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, not only for her interpreting, but for the benefit of her considerable Chinese scholarship and reportorial instinct.

The government's rules about talking to foreigners aren't clear and are obviously in flux. There is no strict rule that people can't talk to foreigners, and foreigners are certainly told they are free to talk to people. But authorities constantly disrupt such conversations on one pretext or another, and the Chinese involved are quickly in trouble over it.

So in big cities and other areas frequented by foreigners, people are on their guard. Those eager to practice English will chat innocently, even initiate the chat, but will quickly grow wary if the conversation turns controversial. In areas foreigners don't visit, however, this wariness is less developed. There is still a vague sense of caution, but often it's forgotten in the excitement of the unexpected, or in normal human byplay. Truths lie closer to the surface. Government agents have come around to places they later learn were visited by foreign reporters; so it's unsafe to name a village.

Most foreign travelers see an artificial China that has been created for them. It is kind of like Disneyland, a series of glossy fictions pretending to be reality. The difference is that while all the fictions in Disneyland are gathered in one place and labeled fantasy, China's Disneyland is dismembered and distributed around the country. At each stop on a trip, a visitor can be taken to half a dozen different phony scenes—factories, child care centers, clinics—each posing as a real thing.

It won't matter whether the foreigner is a tourist, a businessman, or a journalist planning to write a story. The model commune he is taken to see has approximately the relationship to a real commune as Main Street USA in Disneyland has to the Bowery. The Chinese he will be introduced to have approximately the relationship to any real Chinese as the strolling Mickey Mouse does to the average American.

and concrete housing is under construction around the Chinese countryside, but people in this village (or, as it's called in China now, "production team") say they aren't jealous. They say the old style is cooler and roomier (and it is).

Everyone has electricity (the hot wires and wet rice paddies lead to occasional accidental electrocutions). Everyone has a radio and a bicycle. A few privately owned television sets have appeared in the area, but most people rely on the TV set in the communal building. (In one village, a reporter approached several men busily spading the earth at the edge of a vegetable patch, and asked what they were planting. It turned out they were planting a large new TV antenna.)

Water must be carried by bucket from a central spigot a few hundred yards down a dirt path. But the spigot works round-the-clock (in some villages, water is available only three hours a day). The Chinese long ago figured out what to do about plumbing; every bowel movement is carefully saved, mixed in equal proportions with compost, and used as fertilizer.

A small crowd gathers, maybe two dozen including children, to meet the foreigners. They all farm the communal rice paddies that lie in every direction. They also farm private vegetable gardens on small plots the government gives to each family. The communal work pays them about one Chinese yuan—worth 53 U.S. cents—a day. This varies with the number of hours worked; most production teams employ two or three persons as auditors to keep track of when workers come and go.

"We set our own work time," says a woman of about twenty. Most set six-hour days during planting and harvesting. When there's no work to be done, or on rainy days, people don't work at all. Married women work less than others, devoting time to household chores. Consequently, they get paid less.

Sloth is certainly contrary to the U.S. image of gung-ho, revolutionary China. Throughout the rest of Asia, and in North America, persons of Chinese descent are known for their industriousness. But inactivity is the most observable characteristic of Chinese workers in China. The notion that everyone in China is up doing calisthenics at cock's crow is just false. Old photographs suggest that it may once have been a national habit, under orders, during the Cultural Revolution, and you can still see groups of a dozen or two Chinese exercising in the public squares of cities in the morning. But if the practice was ever widespread, it has withered.

China may be the only country in the world where farmers sleep late. If you arrive on a Chinese farm in the gray light of dawn, when almost anywhere in Africa (or Iowa for that matter), people are starting to churn the earth, you will find no Chinese. Farmers sleep till about 7:30, and, what with breakfast and puttering, may not be in the fields until 9:00. The national *xiuxi*, or lunch and nap period, runs officially from noon to 2:00. But most people begin knocking off at about 11:00 or 11:30, and don't return in the afternoon until 2:30. Five P.M. often comes early, too.

These hours apply not only on farms, but at almost every job site in China. The laziness of industrial and office workers often infuriates Western businessmen and diplomats who come to China to get something done. For example, at Qinhuangdao, the country's third-largest port, the berths are full. Ships are lined up for an average wait of three or four days in the harbor before a dock is available. But most dockworkers sit or stand idly. A few slowly unload cargoes of Canadian wheat and U.S. lumber. (China ought to be able to produce wheat and lumber in abundance.)

The slow pace even carries over to the Public Security Bureau, which is certainly an aid to foreign reporters trying to elude their official tails. During the *xiuxi* period, nobody watches anybody, and you can slip away where you will.

By 8:00 or 9:00 P.M. (when Cubans are uncorking some rum and heading for a dance hall) China is turning in. City streets and village roads are deserted. Only foreign visitors can find a public place to eat or drink after that hour, and only in their segregated hotels, even in Beijing. If you arrive during the night, even in a large provincial capital, you will find the streets deserted and the hotel doors locked.

BACK at the farm village, the young woman who described her work hours begins telling of her education—or lack of it. After high school, she had to work in the rice paddies. "Everybody wants to go to college, but we can't get in," she says. Those around her volunteer that the entrance exams are biased toward city students. They say rural schools don't teach well enough for students to have a chance, and that the exam results may even be rigged so that the government can deny advancement to farm people and keep them working the rice paddies.

"Our development has been very uneven," one woman says. "First we had the Great Leap Forward, then we had the Cultural Revolution, then we had the Gang of Four. Lin Piao." She ticks the faults off on her hands and stops complaining only when she runs out of fingers.

What reason is there to think the new regime is better? "Given what we had before, anything that came after was better," she says. Everybody around seems to agree with her. Where are the brainwashed automatons?

"If I get married, I can go and live someplace else," the first young woman says. If her husband farms, she could move to wherever her husband's family is from. If he is established in his lifetime city job, she could move to that city.

Where would she like that to be? An old woman calls out, "I would like to live in America." Everybody laughs. They ask questions about life in the U.S., indicating that they haven't been allowed to read or hear much about the outside world. They have almost no idea how U.S. life is different from theirs, except for an abstract sense that Americans have more money. They

can't imagine what we buy with all that money. They are surprised to hear that the government allows us to choose our own jobs and spouses. Shown a U.S. dollar bill, people ask if the man in the picture is Nixon.

What many people would really like to do is move to the provincial capital, the way farmers all over the world have gravitated to more industrialized jobs and city life.

"We would like it, but there's no way to leave. The government won't allow it," a young man says.

Why? "We're peasants," an old woman answers. "If I could move, I would," she says.

A married woman, thirtyish, says, "We can't move anyplace because we can't rent houses, and we can't get anything to eat, and we can't get work." What she means is that the government controls all these things, and provides them only to people who do what they're told.

CHINA'S nearly 900 million or so peasant farmers are the largest captive labor force in the world. They are almost literally chained to their plows by government edict. By keeping them that way, the government has undoubtedly protected China's food production from the disasters that have befallen other Third World countries where farmers are free to migrate to town.

Moreover, the government has guaranteed the farmers a higher standard of living than most of them would have if they moved to the city, at least at first. Even in the mountains of relatively poor Yunnan province, villagers said there had been no shortages of food since the early 1960s. Though rice and other items are rationed, there is no malnutrition.

But this security, guaranteed by the Chinese government, is no different from the security that is constantly offered and rejected in freer societies. By the millions, Africans and Southeast Asians have moved from the relative comfort and abundance of village farming to joblessness in wretched shantytowns on the edge of cities. However difficult it is for an affluent American to understand, people are willing to give up a lot just to be in sight of cars, bars, running water, the easy life—to smell the possibility, however remote, that they could make the transition to real wealth. Tennesseans once followed the same trail; Detroit was more ready for them.

"I would like to marry a rich man," the first young woman says.

"Do you have a friend you can introduce her to?" asks the old woman who had said she wanted to move to the U.S. They are laughing, but there's a hard edge of seriousness to what's being said, and the thoughts didn't come from the Little Red Book.

People recall the Cultural Revolution. When city workers were shipped out to the rice paddies, an occasional farm girl bagged one, and later went off to live with her new husband's parents in the city. No local men were so fortunate.

* * *

IN the cities and among the better educated, the state often splits up young lovers by intentionally assigning one of them a job in a distant city. This is part of the government's effort to restrain population. Sometimes lovers hastily marry before their job assignments come through. But they usually are separated anyway, and are cynically told to stay in touch with each other by annual visits. Because many jobs don't come with vacations, the annual visit may be limited to a few days.

Ordinarily, the state discourages people from marrying before their late twenties, when their lifetime jobs have been set. Persuading the lovelorn to go along with the state's wishes is one of the major functions of the "neighborhood committees," China's equivalent of Cuba's Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (though the Chinese committees are less significant in the overall scheme of things). The committees provide counseling for couples who fall in love against the desires or convenience of the state.

The state places little value on the family. Vacation schedules aren't coordinated, so couples don't travel together. Work is paramount, and often vacations are organized through the workplace. Most people openly say they don't like these policies. The policy limiting families to one child is also unpopular—a sudden, radical change from tradition. But it is being strictly enforced. Officially, the sanctions for having a second child are financial, but in practice second babies have been taken from mothers at birth, with no more ever being said.

People give only the most grudging defense of the state's job-control policies—something along the lines of the following, from a dye mixer at a chemical factory in Shanghai: "It doesn't matter whether you like your job or don't like it. It's the system. That's where the state needs us. You grow up thinking like that from when you were very, very young, and you don't know how to think any other way."

Next to the pride and defiance of Cubans defending their revolution, that is pretty pallid stuff. Supposedly, it was stronger years ago, back when the Chinese had Yankee attackers of their own to roil and bellow about. Today, the careers they mention are the ones they would *like* to have had if they had been permitted: Shen, the journalist, talking wistfully about architecture; an engineer wishing he could have been a musician; and a woman who wants to be a teacher as both her parents were, but instead is assigned as a translator for an import-export house. It's hard to find anybody who asserts that he really wanted to do whatever it is that he is doing. Maybe that's why people keep such short hours, and why a lot of work doesn't get done.

NONE of these genuine problems that the Chinese face is discussed at meetings of the rural work brigades, or the urban neighborhood committees. These

are supposed to be the grass roots organizations of the revolution, but no one outside government asserts that the grass roots has any control. Average people are even confused about how the leadership for these organizations is chosen. Before every meeting with farmers or workers, the leaders meet with party officials and are told what should be said and done.

A big problem seems to be getting people to attend the meetings at all. Often only a minority shows up, even after the district committee sends around trucks with loudspeakers to try to rouse an audience. If people do attend, they talk or laugh throughout. Some sleep.

The idea that Chinese are tightly disciplined is a joke. True, for people with official power there is almost paranoid rule-following. But for the average Chinese, there is no discipline at all. Kids run loose around villages, totally ignoring the rare attempts of adults to curtail their boisterousness. In an urban day care center, not intended for visitation by foreigners, a tired-looking woman sits glassy-eyed in one corner of a dirty room, ignoring her flock. Children of various ages, their noses running, some with unattended open sores on their faces or bodies, are scrambling wildly over dangerous-looking pieces of broken wooden and metal furniture.

Nine-year-old children are allowed to wander about big cities alone, unattended, even at night. In one sense, there is the overriding order of knowing that each person has been assigned his lot in life, and probably can never escape it. But within that framework, there is shockingly little sense that anyone has direction or dedication.

The government is a fence, there to restrain people who would violate its major dictums: not to leave the assigned home and job, not to have more than one child, not to mix with foreigners, not to spit in public. But within that fenced-in space, the government doesn't seem to be around. Completely contrary to the Cuban experience, people don't seem to feel any sense of participation. They are mostly bored stiff and purposeless, which, given their circumstances, is perfectly understandable.

A few run away, but they usually get caught. If they do make it to the city, they find that the best jobs are often controlled by nepotism, and living conditions are incredibly crowded. Derelicts sleep against building walls, bathing on sidewalks, defecating in gutters. At what government guidebooks say is the best restaurant in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province, beggars come in asking for food. Such things could never happen in Cuba today—not just because of more efficient policing, but because no one is that neglected.

The land of the billion brainwashed automatons, relentlessly determined to communize Asia, turns out instead to be just one more poor Third World country. And, as in so many other such countries, the purportedly socialist leaders have no interest in being part of the egalitarian society they proclaim.

While 80 percent of China's youth are permanently chained to the plow by a rigged education and employment system, about half the members of

the Central Committee of the Communist party, the country's ruling body, have children studying in the United States. The son *and* daughter-in-law of Deng Xiaoping are studying physics at the University of Rochester, in New York, and the son got a summer job with RCA. The son of foreign minister Hua Guofeng went to Harvard.

IN most rural areas, living conditions have clearly been improving since Deng Xiaoping replaced the Gang of Four in 1976–77 (right after the U.S. pulled out and Saigon fell). A year later, the private plot system and some other free-market incentives were introduced. The government supplies cheap materials to people willing to work on their own houses. With neighbors laboring for each other, a lot of new houses are getting built. The people who live in them tend to say they've saved for many years to build them, but that the bulk of the money came in since private plots were started.

It's hard to tell exactly how much land is given over to these plots. The provincial and communal leaders don't want to say. Apparently the plots occupy much less land than is occupied by communal farms, but the private land is much more productive.

Traders risk their own money to buy vegetables from farmers, then sell at the free markets for whatever the traffic will bear—within upper and lower limits set by the government. Before the new rules of Deng Xiaoping in 1978, all markets were run by the government. Before that also, people say, the vegetables weren't as fresh and the meat was so expensive they could afford to eat it only several times a week. Now they eat at least some meat or fish every day.

People find the new system hard to reconcile with what they've always been taught. All they know is that they like it. "This is not capitalism," someone from the market says when the question is raised. "Capitalism is on a larger scale." Most onlookers seem satisfied with this explanation. A farmer in another commune insists that China isn't copying Western capitalism so much as it is copying Western decentralization. "In your country, you have small companies producing things," he says. "In this country we have only recently turned to smaller organizations." Of course, the Great Leap Forward was predicated on small-scale production. But admitting that there's a movement toward capitalistic incentives is a huge pill to swallow after thirty years of Maoist rhetoric. "Capitalism," says the farmer, "is when it costs you $1 to produce something and you sell it for $2."

Still, messages on television encourage individuals to open their own small businesses. Explaining this poses problems even for senior public officials, like Guo Wei, secretary-general of the *People's Daily*. (As the government official in charge of the main national newspaper, he occupies a lofty post in the scheme of things.) At first, Guo says that small businesses aren't capitalism "because they don't exploit people." What precisely is the ex-

ploitation they avoid? "No one is hired. Only the people running the business work there," he says. But on questioning, it turns out that people *are* hired—staffs of up to ten or fifteen employees. What it gets down to is that right now, the government limits the size of private businesses, and the kind of ventures they can engage in. As businesses become more successful, however, they may well be allowed to expand.

THERE'S an all-night train from the farmlands in northeastern Yunnan province, to Kunming, the capital. It has no seats. The cars are boxcars, and the passengers consist almost entirely of farmers, carrying big baskets or burlap bags of eggplant, cabbage, peppers, onions, and watermelons. The farmers perch on wooden slats around the sides of the cars. It is miserably uncomfortable, and the train makes interminable slow stops, picking up more farmers.

None of these men and women is commercing on behalf of his work team or commune. They are private farmers, bringing the goods from their private plots to market. The ride is only about 55 cents a person. The problem is the tax on the vegetables. This is where the government tries to get its cut from private enterprise, and the process is different only in sophistication, not contentiousness, from that process anywhere.

Everyone is supposed to have his goods weighed and taxes paid before getting on the train. The tax collector thinks there has been cheating. A woman with three big bundles can produce only two receipts. She insists that the third basket, mushrooms, is to give to her relatives, not to sell. "I don't need a receipt," she is yelling.

The tax collector points an angry finger, and hollers back, "You're going to get more than 30 yuan [about $16.20] for that basket."

"All right, I'll sell it to you for fifteen," she screams. She is close to tears, or a good actress. He still charges her, but only half a yuan, about 27 cents.

Similar words are repeated over and over, with almost every farmer. A man with watermelons loses his fight, and complains the whole rest of the way. He has been charged a tax of 8 yuan, or $4.32. He complains that 8 yuan is all he can get for the melons, and runs through calculations for the tax collector predicated on a melon price of 10 mao per jin (approximately a pound), which he says is the going price in Kunming.

In Kunming, however, it turns out that similar melons are selling on the street for 60 mao a jin. Who says the free-enterprise spirit is dead in China!

ANOTHER old man, in another commune, doesn't like the new trend. He and his three sons work hard on their private plot; the young men pull the plow by hand with enormous effort. "The people are stronger than animals,"

the old man says. "Even if there was enough money, we would not have an animal. There are a lot of people and so little land." But even after all that effort, he won't sell on the private market. What they don't eat, he says, he will give away.

"Some people are willing to make money, I am not," he says. "I don't think those things are important. The attitude most people have is asking for more and more. I think people should take only what they need to live on. The state must have economic planning, or else there will be trouble. My asking for more things would hurt the country."

On his wall is a poster, a picture of some Viet Cong, and the slogan, "The Vietnamese People Must Be Victorious." It is from 1965. It is the only such poster seen on a trip throughout China. Visitors point out that it's out of date. The last country the Vietnamese were victorious over was China. The old man laughs.

"I don't think most people feel the way I feel," he says. "I have children who make money. Chinese thought is getting narrower."