

Speaking about China, Learning from China:  
Amateur China Experts in 1970s America

Sigrid Schmalzer<sup>1</sup>

**Introduction**

In the spring of 1981, an American sociologist began a short article in an academic journal with this self-effacing remark: “Realizing that soon the time will have passed when a two- or three-week trip to the 'People's Republic' qualifies one as a 'China expert,' I want to seize the opportunity to join the ranks before they close.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, beginning with "ping-pong diplomacy" in April 1971, the renewal of relations between China and the United States ushered in a brief new era of what I call “amateur China experts” in America.<sup>3</sup> While many academics with decades of research on China behind them struggled to arrange their first visits, scores of Americans who could not even order *yuxiang rousi* in Chinese secured invitations to tour China's schools, factories, communes, and research institutions. Some were professionals eager to discover what their counterparts in China were doing. The Chinese premier Zhou Enlai particularly welcomed scientists with advanced knowledge of subjects valuable to China's modernization.<sup>4</sup> Others were members of organizations like the U.S.-China People's Friendship Association hoping to find in Chinese socialism the kinds of egalitarian institutions for which they agitated in the United States. The Chinese state had an interest in inviting such travelers as well, since they were the most likely to spread positive stories about China in the United States. While most scientists and activists arrived in China with relatively little background in Chinese history and culture, they returned as "experts" and found their impressions and their photographs in hot demand.

This article will explore the phenomenon of these “amateur China experts” and the picture of socialist China they helped create. It will focus specifically on the emphasis visitors placed on China's socialist approach to science, technology, and medicine. As Zuoyue Wang has shown, scientific exchange played a central role in the 1970s reopening of U.S.-China relations.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, science offers a “hard case” to test the limits of visitor enthusiasm for Chinese socialism. Why would people from a technologically developed superpower like the United States express excitement to learn about

1 I am grateful for the assistance of the following people: Minna Barrett, Jeremy Brown, Frances Crowe, Eric Entemann, Britta Fischer, Herb Fox, Arthur Galston, Marta Hanson, Chuck Hayford, Perry Link, Melanie McCalmont, Andy Rotter, Ethan Signer, Vinton Thompson, Zuoyue Wang, and an anonymous reviewer. Responsibility for all errors and other flaws rests with me alone.

2 Peter Weingart, “The Science of Science in China: Report by a Sociologist of Science,” *Science, Technology, and Human Values* 6.35 (1981): 14.

3 On the phenomenon of “amateur experts” (or “lay experts”) in AIDS research, see Steven Epstein, “The Construction of Lay Expertise: AIDS Activism and the Forging of Credibility in the Reform of Clinical Trials,” *Science, Technology, and Human Values* 20.4 (1995): 498-437.

4 Zuoyue Wang, “U.S.-China Scientific Exchange: A Case Study of State-Sponsored Scientific Internationalism during the Cold War and Beyond,” *Historical Studies in the Physical and Biological Sciences* 30.1 (Fall, 1999): 249-277, 255. The MIT microbiologist Ethan Signer met with Zhou Enlai on 19 May 1971 and wrote in his travel journal: “Started off talking about Vietnam since we had been there... Indicated further visits [to China] by scientists would be welcome – looks like they might be selective and take only anti-war ones.”

5 Wang, “U.S.-China Scientific Exchange.”

science as practiced in a poor, technologically backward country like China? That many did makes an especially strong statement about what Americans looked for in China. From radical activists to professional scientists – whether writing in academic journals or giving slide shows in church basements and living rooms – visitors returned to paint similarly flattering portraits of socialist Chinese science.

We will begin with several historical narratives of American delegations to 1970s China: why they went, what they experienced, and how they told their "China stories" when they returned. We will then turn to common threads in how the visitors handled issues of expertise and authority, and what they sought to learn from China. The analysis builds on -- and in some ways challenges -- two key scholarly works: Paul Hollander's *Political Pilgrims: Western Intellectuals in Search of the Good Society* and Richard Madsen's *China and the American Dream: A Moral Inquiry*.<sup>6</sup>

Hollander examines the fascination communist countries have held for Western intellectuals estranged from their own cultures' values and institutions. While he provides several chapters that set the domestic context for such interests, the heart of his book lies in its accounts of those who traveled to the Soviet Union, Cuba, and China "in search of the good society." Hollander delves deeply into commonalities in the visitors' collective experiences to highlight many uncomfortable truths about their limited understandings and even willful blindness regarding the societies they encountered. However, he says little about the people themselves and their specific trajectories. In part this is because he is interested in general patterns rather than individuals; and in part it is because he limits himself to the visitors' published writings, which though very valuable are far richer when considered together with oral histories, travel journals, and other unpublished documents. Moreover, he confines his discussion to intellectuals who traveled for dominantly political reasons and thus loses the opportunity to compare such visitors with academics on professional delegations and activists outside intellectual circles. Finally, Hollander is blatantly hostile toward his subjects: he seeks throughout to use their shortcomings to discredit liberal and leftist criticisms of the West.<sup>7</sup> This is unfortunate, since it alienates the very people who most need to confront the important points he raises.

Richard Madsen's work focuses specifically on the relationship between the United States and China. Like Hollander, Madsen is more interested in overarching patterns than in micro-historical narratives. While he makes use of interviews, he does not pursue individual stories at great length or in significant depth. Moreover, because Madsen is primarily interested in understanding mainstream American attitudes toward China, his treatment of radicals is limited to brief sections on the Committee for Concerned Asian Scholars. However, he discusses the individual institutional contexts of his examples (which include academics, religious missionaries, political figures, and journalists) far more fully than Hollander does and he juxtaposes them to greater effect in his analysis. Like Hollander, Madsen offers incisive criticisms of the limitations and distortions of Americans' visions of China, but his far greater exercise of empathy allows for a much more intimate and nuanced understanding of the people under study – who they were and why they acted as they did. Moreover, Madsen's conclusions

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6 Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Western Intellectuals in Search of the Good Society*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Press, 1998 [1981]); Richard Madsen, *China and the American Dream: A Moral Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). Given their overlapping interests, it is striking to note that Madsen's 1995 work does not engage with Hollander's book, first published in 1981; nor does Hollander discuss Madsen in his 1998 revised edition.

7 In addition to enumerating the visitors' faults, Hollander further argues that "the mainsprings of estrangement and the associated social criticism need not invariably arise from the ascertainable shortcomings of social institutions but have also much to do with the ease with which they can be expressed and with the cultural (or subcultural) rewards available for such critical attitudes" (p. 415). In other words, according to Hollander, critics are able to voice their opposition because they live in such an advanced and free society, and they receive encouragement for doing so from their fellow travelers, who have psychological barriers to assimilating into the dominant culture.

stand in striking contrast with Hollander's. He describes his subjects as “missionaries of the American dream” who believed that “American liberal values were universal and that, having been exposed to them, Chinese society would eventually adopt them.” Madsen sees the renewal of U.S.-China relations to have helped many Americans “to postpone reconsideration of some of the increasingly problematic assumptions underneath their major public institutions” and “to believe once again that they still had something to teach the rest of the world.” While Madsen recognizes that some Americans sought to learn from Chinese socialism, he folds this into the missionary impulse: “after having taken to heart the Maoist message, they might now teach others the true meaning of the Chinese revolution.”<sup>8</sup>

Hollander's and Madsen's accounts each offer much of value, but assembling a different assortment of cases, drawing from more intimate sources, and paying more attention to the ways returned visitors communicated their experiences will produce new insights into the historical significance of the 1970s U.S. delegations to China. By bringing together detailed accounts of the travels and storytelling of professional scientists, activists, and those who straddle both categories, we will arrive at a deeper understanding of what China meant, and what it meant to know something about China, in 1970s America.

### Separate Voyages

#### 1971-1972: From Agent Orange to the People's Republic

On 10 May 1971, less than a month after the advent of “ping-pong diplomacy,” Arthur Galston and Ethan Signer became the first American scientists to visit the People's Republic of China. The trip – though certainly exciting – was in fact a bit of a jaunt tacked onto their more serious visit to Vietnam. A microbiologist at M.I.T., Ethan Signer had been active for several years in Scientists and Engineers for Social and Political Action (later known as Science for the People), a radical organization that emerged out of widespread opposition to the Vietnam War. Its members were committed to steering science and technology away from militarism and corporate profits and toward fundamental social needs. Arthur Galston's reason for traveling to Vietnam was more personal. In the early 1940s, Galston had completed dissertation research demonstrating the effects of a chemical compound known as TIBA on soybean plants. He later discovered that his work had helped the U.S. military develop powerful defoliants, including Agent Orange. As a biologist at Yale, Galston worked closely with two organizations, the Scientists' Institute for Public Information and Scientists for Social Responsibility in Science, to oppose the military use of Agent Orange.<sup>9</sup> Traveling to Vietnam meant an opportunity to document the consequences of chemical defoliation and American military actions as a whole.<sup>10</sup>

Then, just as Galston and Signer were preparing to depart for Vietnam, word came of the U.S. ping-pong team's groundbreaking visit to China, and the PRC government began openly declaring it would welcome American travelers. The two scientists quickly realized that they were politically and geographically in a good position to visit a country long closed to all but a few Americans. They sent a letter to the Chinese embassy in Ottawa and wrote letters as well to the British scientist and longtime “friend of China,” Joseph Needham, along with a Belgian scientist, René Thomas. At a recent scientific conference Signer and others had organized a political meeting where Thomas had shown slides of his 1964 trip to China.<sup>11</sup>

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8 Madsen, *China and the American Dream*, 161 and 118.

9 Galston's efforts were noticed in China at least by Chinese Academy of Sciences Vice President Zhu Kezhen, who recorded in his diary on 15 May 1970 that he had read Galston's and others' perspectives on the subject. Zhu Kezhen, *Zhu Kezhen riji* [The Diary of Zhu Kezhen] (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 1990), vol. 5, 361.

10 Interview with Arthur Galston.

11 Interview with Ethan Signer. Jonathan Beckwith, Ira Herskowitz, Mark Ptashne, Ethan Signer, and René Thomas,

Signer and Galston had not yet heard a reply when they embarked on their journey to Vietnam, so during a stop-over in Paris they swung by a branch of the Olivetti typewriter company and composed a letter on the demonstration typewriter chained conveniently outside the store. When they brought the letter to the Chinese embassy in Paris, they found many other Americans also applying for permission to visit. It was only when they reached the Chinese embassy in Hanoi that they finally learned that they would in fact be traveling to China.<sup>12</sup>

On the plane from Hanoi to Nanning, China, Signer wrote in his journal:

We step on the plane and presto we are in China – everything is completely new and different. I feel like a child in a garden of delights. In Hanoi I knew what to expect and came prepared to dig up certain well-defined things. In China I know absolutely nothing, am prepared to be astounded, and besides haven't the weight of responsibility and urgency to do anything I can to end the war or help a people who desperately need what I can give.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, Signer knew considerably more about China than "absolutely nothing" – he had read William Hinton's *Fanshen* and other accounts of the Chinese revolution that were part of the "compendium of knowledge that people on the left had" at that time.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless Signer recorded a profound difference in his feelings about the Vietnam trip and the China trip. Later that evening at the hotel in Nanning, Signer once again sought to put into words the transition he was experiencing:

Struck by contrast with Viet Nam. There – knew pretty much what to expect, value is in reporting facts and details, felt great seriousness and responsibility, basically work. Here all unknown and new don't feel any great seriousness, more like a vacation after Viet Nam, whole thing is a lark, impressions are what is important.<sup>15</sup>

After the great import of their visit to Vietnam – where he felt he was making a real contribution to the anti-war effort – Signer found it difficult to identify the significance of his trip in China. This put a strain on his early relations with his Chinese hosts. With the Vietnamese, there had been "things of substance to discuss, work to do together that made all our contacts meaningful and worthwhile." But "we and the Chinese really have very little to say to each other so time is filled with inane pleasantries and unfunny jokes." On top of travel exhaustion, the "small talk" was "unbearable."<sup>16</sup>

Although Galston also complained of speaking "solely in social amenities," from the start his experience appears to have been much different from Signer's. Like Signer, he had read popular leftist accounts of the Chinese revolution. His wife was an avid reader of Edgar Snow and Agnes Smedley, and her interests had rubbed off on him. But despite this preparation, when he arrived in China he felt everything to be "fresh, new, and exciting."<sup>17</sup>

The sense of distance for Signer was to fade as the guests and hosts began finding more common interests. The hosts asked "about American left politics," whether there "were any left political parties." When Signer mentioned "guerrilla actions," they thought he "was referring to Black Panther party," which they had been following with interest. They further asked about "different kinds of political activity" and how the "left expressed anti-war feelings..."<sup>18</sup> By the end of the trip, Signer was feeling much more positively about the experience, a change he attributed "mostly to finally getting

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"Political Discussions at Gordon Conference," *Science* 171.3973 (26 Feb. 1971): 752.

12 Interview with Signer.

13 Ethan Signer's travel journal (in author's collection, hereafter "Signer journal"), 10 May 1971.

14 Interview with Signer.

15 Signer journal, 10 May 1971

16 Signer journal, 11 May 1971.

17 Interview with Galston.

18 Signer journal, 16 May 1971.

down to business of what China is all about with visits to Institutes, factory, commune, etc." He continued, "Putting it on a work basis loosened things up for me and enabled me to break through formalities, put a little more meaning in them." He ended up feeling very warm toward almost everyone, and had already developed a nostalgia for China when he wrote of his crossing into the British New Territories (north of Hong Kong): "trash, clutter, thousands of automobiles, garish neon signs, people looking tatty. Heigh ho, back in the Free World again."<sup>19</sup>

So, what was China "all about" in the eyes of these visitors? Their trip began with a visit to a trade fair in Guangzhou, where Signer concluded, "They know what they want and are going to grind it out until they get there and maybe beyond – going for all the marbles." At universities and research laboratories, they witnessed primitive working conditions that made clear the challenges Chinese scientists faced. But there were also examples of triumph. A factory in Beijing staffed mostly with "formerly illiterate housewives" previously made "Imperial Chinese scales," but had succeeded in acquiring the knowledge and skills to produce high-precision, automatically controlled diffusion furnaces used in electronics manufacture. Nothing inspired more photographs than the demonstration of acupuncture anesthesia: the patient remained conscious while surgeons removed an ovarian cyst the size of a baseball, which she then asked to see when the operation was over. For Galston, however, the highlight of the trip was their visit to Malu Commune (outside Shanghai), and he quickly decided he would like to return to the Chinese countryside for a longer stay.<sup>20</sup>

While their interactions with the guides were often strained, several other human encounters made a big difference to their overall impressions. When they had first arrived in China and were asked what they most wanted to see, Signer had boldly asked if they could meet with Chairman Mao. Their hosts did the next best thing and arranged a leisurely two-and-a-half-hour meeting with Premier Zhou Enlai, whose sharp mind, direct manner, and generous welcome greatly impressed them.<sup>21</sup> They were also able to meet a few old friends. Galston had indicated on his visa application that he knew two scientists in China: Loo Shih-wei (formerly of Caltech) and Lee Cheng-li (formerly of Yale). When their plane touched down in Shanghai, Loo Shih-wei was there to greet them. Galston ran up and threw his arms around him, but Loo stood stiffly at attention in his newly starched "Mao suit" and did not return the gesture. Galston understood then that he had made a faux pas, but did not think much more of it, and they soon were able to visit Loo at his very beautiful Shanghai apartment and talk in English, free of the encumbrance of interpreters or other official guides.<sup>22</sup> They had a similar opportunity in Beijing, where they had lunch with Lee Cheng-li and his wife, a doctor named Shen Shu-chin Galston had also known in the United States.

A few themes recur frequently in Signer's journal. As with so many other visitors to China, the food captivated him, and he typically recorded every item served at lavish banquets. Around town, he often noted how well fed and well clothed people were and how clean they kept the streets and parks. He was also often struck by a sense of egalitarianism: even waiters would join conversations with important officials without embarrassment. Finally, he persistently noted an emphasis on the home-grown: "Even key to desk drawer in my room says 'Made in China.'"

When Galston and Signer returned to the United States, people flocked to hear their impressions of China – more even than their reporting on Vietnam.<sup>23</sup> There to greet them as they descended from their plane at JFK airport was a man with a fedora hat and steely gray eyes. Galston's first thought was "FBI," but the man guided them directly to a VIP room filled with reporters assembled for a press

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19 Signer journal, 24 May 1971

20 Arthur Galston with Jean Service, *Daily Life in People's China* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1973), 53.

21 Signer journal, 19 May 1971; Galston, *Daily Life*, 4-5.

22 Interview with Galston.

23 Interview with Galston.

conference.<sup>24</sup> The *New York Times* published several articles about their trip, twice on the front page, and the *Boston Globe* published an article and photo spread (including a photograph on the cover) in its Sunday magazine the following October. The articles highlighted their meeting with Zhou Enlai, their appreciation for Chinese food, their positive assessment of Chinese science, and their observations of acupuncture anesthesia, the last of which generated enormous interest among the general public.<sup>25</sup>

Galston and Signer also gave slide shows and lectures for high school and college classes, political groups, and church groups. Galston remembers offering on the order of one hundred talks in the first year after his return: his "life as a scientist was wrecked for a year." He even lectured in Washington D.C. to an audience of about a dozen China experts – including John King Fairbank and Allen Whiting – who positively "salivated" over the picture of Galston and Signer meeting with Zhou Enlai. While he received many invitations to speak specifically on acupuncture, he quickly began turning these down unless they would allow him to speak more generally about China and its people.<sup>26</sup> Recognizing that the U.S. and China had been "enemies" for some time, his goal was to convey to American audiences that "these were real people" with "many endearing qualities," in short to "humanize" Chinese people in the eyes of Americans.<sup>27</sup> As always, Vietnam was a much bigger priority for Signer, and he would often use such talks as opportunities to "pass the hat" for Medical Aid for Indo-China. But China also had significance: it helped him to convey the message that "the revolution had come."<sup>28</sup>

This was also an implicit message in an article Signer and Galston wrote for the 7 January 1972 issue of *Science* magazine, entitled "Education and Science in China," where they specifically outlined the ongoing revolution they had witnessed in the realm of science.

We found that, under the impetus of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese are experimenting with new ways of organizing science and medicine. They are trying to integrate scientific research more closely with the immediate needs of industry and agriculture, to broaden the scope of medical care so that it reaches as much of the population as possible, and to do away with institutional and social customs that used to keep intellectuals and professionals as elite classes culturally distinct from ordinary people.<sup>29</sup>

Copious examples culled from their notes substantiated this overarching statement. They shared the case of Loo Shih-wei.<sup>30</sup> With the coming of the Cultural Revolution, Loo had begun working more

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24 Interview with Galston.

25 Benjamin Welles, "American Scientist Reports He Gave Advice to Chou," *New York Times*, 5 June 1971: 2; Seymour Topping, "U.S. Biologists in China Tell of Scientific Gains," *New York Times*, 24 May 1971: 1, 10; Tillman Durdin, "China: The Open Door Is Still Only Open a Crack," *New York Times*, 16 May 1971: E2; Raymond A. Sokolov, "When It Comes to Food, at Least, China Clings to Past," *New York Times*, 17 February 1972: 42. Signer, interview. *Boston Globe* 10 October 1971. The *New York Times* also printed a front-page article on Galston and Signer's trip when they received approval for their visas in Hanoi. Walter Sullivan, "2 U.S. Scientists Will Visit China," *New York Times*, 11 May 1971: 1.

26 Interview with Galston. Galston remembers that "the word 'acupuncture' dominated" his conversations with many people. Some were fascinated; others (especially his medical colleagues at Yale) contemptuous or even angry and insistent that Galston was either lying or had been "duped."

27 Interview with Galston.

28 Interview with Signer.

29 Ethan Signer and Arthur Galston, "Education and Science in China," *Science* 175.4017 (7 January 1972): 15-23, 15. This followed an earlier article they wrote entitled "Education and Science in North Vietnam," *Science* 174.4007 (22 October 1971): 379-85.

30 Zhu Kezhen recorded in his diary on 24 March 1972 that he read this article and noted that most of it had been translated into Chinese and published in the periodical *Cankao xiaoxi*. He especially noted the mention of Loo Shih-wei. Some of this material was redacted from the diary before publishing; a new, complete version should be available soon in the

closely with peasants at an agricultural commune outside Shanghai. The peasants had suggested new applications for the plant hormone gibberellin, and together they had developed an inexpensive means of producing a crude form of the hormone on site. Signer and Galston also recounted their visit with Lee Cheng-li and his wife Shen Shu-chin. In addition to giving Shen's account of her satisfaction in "serving the people," they noted that Lee "looked bronzed, lean, and healthy and insisted that he feels much better now that he spends some time in the fields doing manual labor."<sup>31</sup> And everywhere they saw the commitment to "self-reliance." Pulling from Signer's notes, they pointed out the "use of Chinese words for even very technical terms – such as ribosome, aneuploid, and heterozygote – presumably another instance of self-reliance."<sup>32</sup>

Although Galston and Signer were welcomed to China very much as scientists, and were advertised back home as the "first U.S. scientists" to visit the People's Republic, when it came to sharing their experiences, the "human" factor often dominated. Most of the slides they used in their talks – a woman holding a baby, a man poling a small river boat, workers on a bamboo scaffold restoring a wall in the Imperial Palace – had nothing to do with science, but simply "gave flavor" to the stories they told.<sup>33</sup> In the *Science* article, they noted that their "immediate and lasting impression was that the Chinese people today are well fed, healthy, adequately clothed and housed, extremely hardworking, and loyal to the present government." They reminded their readers that by comparison, "starvation, disease, alternating food and drought, crime, drug addiction, prostitution, and sale of children were frequently described as standard features of life in China before 1949 when the present government took power."<sup>34</sup>

With the war in Vietnam still raging, *Science* magazine chose to print critical letters on the pair's earlier article on Vietnam and not the China piece (or perhaps the critics focused their frustrations on the former). The letter writers accused Galston and Signer of failing "to make critical, discriminative judgments" and of having "had the rice hulls pulled over their eyes." The authors defended themselves by saying that they had tried "to avoid editorial comment... and specify what we saw and what we were told, leaving the reader to make his or her own judgment."<sup>35</sup> This was certainly true of their article on China, which typically framed issues in the terms favored by the Chinese government. For example, in discussing Mao's encouragement of uniting theory and practice and making science an endeavor both by and for the people, they explained, "The 'revisionist' influence of Liu Shao-chi presumably prevented the application of this policy, but the Cultural Revolution has now instituted a number of reforms to put it into practice."<sup>36</sup>

For Signer, life soon moved on and China for the most part faded into the background. Galston, however, developed a deep attachment to China, and particularly to rural China. When he met with Zhou Enlai, Galston mentioned that his wife was going to be very angry with him for leaving her behind, since she was the real "China expert" in the family. Zhou promptly invited him to return with his wife and children. Emboldened by Zhou's friendliness, Galston pushed a step further and insisted that they did not want to come as tourists but to have a meaningful experience, preferably on an agricultural commune. Zhou assured him that this too was possible, and indeed the very next year Galston and his family spent the better part of two months in China, including two weeks at Lugou

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series *Zhu Kezhen quan ji*. Zhu Kezhen, *Zhu Kezhen riji*, vol. 5, 520-521.

31 Signer and Galston, "Education and Science in China," 18.

32 Signer and Galston, "Education and Science in China," 20.

33 Interview with Signer.

34 Signer and Galston, "Education and Science in China," 15.

35 Franklin Del Jones, Le van Than, Steven Tannenbaum, Ethan Signer, Arthur W. Galston, "Letters: North Vietnamese Science," *Science* 178.4057 (13 October 1972): 113-114.

36 Signer and Galston, "Education and Science in China," 16.

Qiao Commune (Marco Polo Bridge Commune) just outside Beijing.<sup>37</sup>

As with Galston and Signer's earlier trip, the Galston family often found the officials assigned to them overbearing. In contrast with the egalitarianism they witnessed among waiters and officials, Galston and Signer had been appalled to see their hosts violently push away people who had gathered to witness the foreign spectacle.<sup>38</sup> Recalling his second trip, Galston says that unlike the "pasty-faced bureaucrats with their clipboards," "the peasants with their calloused hands were our immediate friends." The cadre who traveled with them in Beijing insisted on keeping the limousine's window shades pulled down to prevent people on the street from seeing them. The driver bullied bicyclists on the street, charging down on them with his horn blaring so that they "scattered like ducks." The Galstons responded by repeatedly opening the window shades and arguing with the driver about his driving style. Finally, the cadre told them that if they did not like being limousine passengers, they could take public transportation. This is what they did, even though it meant a long trip to the commune on several buses and lugging their baggage on foot for the last kilometer.<sup>39</sup>

Galston wrote up his impressions from both trips in a book published in 1973. Although his particular experience as a scientist visiting research institutes and universities played a role, the book's focus was once again on the "human" experience of China, and it is aptly titled *Daily Life in People's China*. Indeed, while we might expect Galston to have noted any agricultural science underway at Lugou Qiao Commune, what he saw he deemed not worth reporting, and other than the previously mentioned work on gibberellin, he declined to discuss much in the way of specific agricultural science, since what he heard bordered on the "kooky" (typically, flirting with Lysenkoist ideas that crop varieties could be transformed by altering environmental conditions).<sup>40</sup>

Despite his self-censoring, the account is by no means without criticism. For example, the Galstons were troubled by what they saw at a "Children's Palace," where gifted children participated in afterschool activities. The dancing, "professionally but mechanically executed, gave the children the aspect of puppets on strings." The obstacle course "undoubtedly develops good coordination and strong bodies, but its implications for training in military discipline were all too obvious." While Galston's wife and daughter felt that the institution trained children to "follow in lockstep whatever orders any leader issued to them," Galston himself was impressed by the "emphasis on cooperation and mutual concern." Still, he had to admit to "some disquiet over the possible effects of such a tightly organized educational system on the student's later ability to act independently."<sup>41</sup>

Such moments of concern aside, the book is nonetheless overwhelmingly positive in its depiction of Chinese socialism. For example, Galston wrote of the "genius" of the health care system:

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37 Interview with Galston. Galston was under the impression that "nothing like us had ever hit their region before." Since they arrived unconventionally (for Westerners) on foot, this may have been true. However, other foreigners had visited Marco Polo Bridge Commune. Hong Kong resident and China scholar C. H. G. Oldham reported on a 1964 visit to Marco Polo Bridge Commune, which he "saw with six other tourists." "Visits to Chinese Communes," letter to R. H. Nolte of Institute of Current World Affairs, 18 January 1965. Courtesy of Institute of Current World Affairs, CHGO-45, [www.icwa.org/txtArticles/CHGO-45.htm](http://www.icwa.org/txtArticles/CHGO-45.htm).

38 Interview with Galston.

39 Interview with Galston. The bus trip to the commune, though not the arguments that led up to it, appear in Galston, *Daily Life*, 55-57.

40 Interview with Galston. As on other communes in this period, there was emphasis at Lugou Qiao on "scientific agriculture." Specifically, in February 1972, *People's Daily* reported that Lugou Qiao and other Beijing-area communes were experimenting with the planting of several crops from other areas in China. Either his hosts did not think to highlight such experiments (which would be odd given the propaganda value and their knowledge of his specialty) or Galston was not impressed enough to comment. Xinhua she, "Dongtian li de chuntian: Beijing jin jiao cai qu jishi" [Spring in the Middle of Winter: Notes on Beijing's Suburban Vegetable (Farming) District], *Renmin ribao*, 29 February 1972: 4.

41 Galston, *Daily Life*, 179-80.

"It has literally been taken to the people, not superimposed on top of the society it must serve in huge, unavailable medical centers. And it seems to have happened overnight."<sup>42</sup> Despite the disruptions of the Cultural Revolution in education, Galston was certain that "this university and all the others in the Chinese educational system are providing a democratized and practical means of offering advanced training to a cross section of the young working people." This "egalitarian ideal... attracts and holds the loyalty of Chinese youth."<sup>43</sup> Moreover, he felt confident that the Chinese government had earned the support of the people: "The masses trust their leadership because their leadership has surrounded them with all the material, educational, and medical necessities of life. Their leadership has encouraged 'struggle-criticism-transformation,' charged them to 'Dare to think, dare to act' and 'put politics in command,' and the mass line has brought these ideas to the people. The rhetoric surely rolls off their backs, but the essence of it is deep in their minds and hearts because they can see it working."<sup>44</sup>

Galston continued over the years to broker scientific exchanges with China, both for people with primarily professional motivations and those with deep political interests in the socialist nation. He helped arrange for the first visit of Ruth and Victor Sidel, who later wrote to such acclaim on the advances in medical services and the improvement in the lives of women and children in the People's Republic. He also helped put together a trip for a delegation from the politically progressive Federation of American Scientists.<sup>45</sup> Ethan Signer too had friends interested in traveling to China: their story comes next.

### 1973: Science for the People Meets the People's Republic

On 11 February 1972, Ethan Signer wrote a letter to the Chinese Embassy in Ottawa proposing that a delegation of ten to fifteen radical American science activists visit the People's Republic of China. The organization – originally called Science and Engineers for Social and Political Action (SESPA), but best known as Science for the People – attracted well-known scientists like Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin, engineers in high-tech companies, graduate students in the sciences, health care workers, and others concerned about the ways that capitalism and imperialism had perverted the American scientific establishment. Deriving inspiration and energy from the anti-war movement, they formed anti-hierarchical collectives in college towns around the country.

Months before Signer's overture, SESPA members in Boston and Stony Brook, New York had established groups to discuss science as practiced in the People's Republic of China. They read Joshua Horn's *Away with All Pests*, William Hinton's *Fanshen*, and other literature that conveyed Chinese people's efforts to remake society and to create a science both by and for the people. Members of the Stony Brook chapter had the added benefit of sharing the State University of New York campus with Nobel Laureate C. N. Yang, a Chinese-American physicist who visited China in 1971 and again in 1972. While in China, Yang met with Zhou Enlai and expressed his concerns that excessive emphasis on applied science was undermining basic research.<sup>46</sup> (This was Zhou's position as well, in contrast with Jiang Qing and her circle, who promoted applied science as fitting with socialist ideals of serving the people in contrast with basic research, which they associated with the ivory tower.) But when he spoke in New York to overflow crowds, he aimed to instill interest in, and even enthusiasm for, China's novel approach to science. Minna Goldfarb – then a SESPA member and SUNY graduate student – remembers Yang voicing some doubts that attempts to “turn everyone into a backyard scientist” would live up to expectations, but he was nonetheless excited by the different social perspective informing

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42 Galston, *Daily Life*, 211.

43 Galston, *Daily Life*, 202.

44 Galston, *Daily Life*, 235.

45 Interview with Galston.

46 Wang, “U.S.-China Scientific Exchange,” 260.

science policy in China, and this excitement was infectious.<sup>47</sup>

Having received a favorable reply from the Chinese government, the SESPA chapters in Boston and Stony Brook began organizing in earnest. The first and most important question was: who would go? Meeting jointly in June, they decided: "Given good politics, women should be preferred over men, working people over professionals, and third world people over white." They had received thirty-three applications from people interested in participating, but considered many tainted by "too much professionalism and not enough politics." At a subsequent meeting in July, the group hashed out some of the larger issues raised in that discussion. Some felt the term "professionalism" had been used to "derogate people with Ph.D.s," so the group set about trying to "understand [the] connections [of professionalism] to class position and bourgeois society, its existence as an attitude to be struggled against (in ourselves as well as others)." Some expressed their commitment to thinking about how to develop "relevant scientific skills" without engaging in "narrow professionalism."<sup>48</sup>

In the end, the delegation included a community activist, a computer programmer, a psychologist, a nurse, two chemists, a juvenile justice planner (formerly a psychologist), and three graduate students (in medicine, social psychology, and evolutionary genetics). As one delegate remembers it, the chapters used the "Chinese revolutionary method" of "three in one" to select the participants, ensuring broad representation across occupation and age.<sup>49</sup>

Participants were also anxious to plan how they would interact with "the Chinese." They "agreed on struggling to be treated as much as possible like the masses," and they decided to "formulate for ourselves a reasonably coherent analysis of the U.S. left" so that they could impart this information to their Chinese hosts. They also floated the idea of visiting factories and farms in the U.S. to inform the Chinese about conditions here.<sup>50</sup>

Another key topic of their pre-trip meetings concerned the book they planned to write when they returned. The trip's primary objective was to spread the word about science as practiced in socialist China. In June, they agreed that the "contents of the book should be directed toward a mass audience, not limited to the scientific establishment." They further decided to "present our politics clearly, particularly emphasizing the contradictions in our own society as well as the positive aspects of what we see in China." After considering several offers from publishing companies, they settled on Avon because the editors there were willing to release it as a paperback directly, which fit their goal of "mass outreach."<sup>51</sup>

Shortly before the group gathered in San Francisco for their final meeting and flights to China, SESPA member Dan Connell wrote the delegates a letter reminding them to plan carefully before they departed to ensure they would return with sufficient materials to write the book. After discussing the project with the executive director of Avon, Peter Mayer, Connell determined that it would not be possible to include an analysis of science as practiced in the United States. Mayer also strongly suggested that the group write specifically for people directly involved in the sciences, rather than trying to reach a broad audience. Connell disagreed with this proposition but still urged the group to think seriously about the issue. He noted, "While the American Left has consistently been unable to speak to the needs of the American masses in a way that they would accept, nowadays we're not even

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47 Interview with Minna Barrett (then Minna Goldfarb). Yang's excitement for the "spirit" behind socialist Chinese approaches to science was also documented in John Noble Wilford, "Physicist Tells of Visit to China," *New York Times*, 23 September 1971, 21.

48 "China Group Meeting," 18 June 1972; "Eastern Regional SESPA China Group Meeting," 3 July 1972. Both in author's collection. Note that in the July meeting the participants also agreed to change the language from "good politics" to "good political practice."

49 Interview with Barrett.

50 "Eastern Regional SESPA Group Meeting."

51 "China Group Meeting."

fashionable." He further advised them to "[l]ook for tales of pre-Revolutionary & pre-cultural Revolutionary China to set current experience in its context – Americans will want to make direct comparisons with life here, so we must strive for historical perspective."<sup>52</sup>

As it turned out, the delegates had been right to think seriously about how to talk to "the Chinese." On their very first day in China, they met to critique their experiences thus far and agreed to "avoid ego involvement + tales in talking to Chinese."<sup>53</sup> In other words, they decided that it was not in fact very helpful to discuss their own political activities back in the United States. It is likely that they had arrived expecting to be able to bond with their Chinese hosts by expressing their opposition to American capitalist society but had instead encountered discomfort. After all, the Chinese government had just recently opened relations with the United States and was doing its best to gloss over political differences in order to pursue diplomatic objectives. Moreover, radical politics in China and America were often quite different. While radicals in both China and America sought deep transformations in social structures and cultural practices, and also explicitly shared many specific concerns like women's equality, at a more specific level there was much room for disagreement. When, later in the trip, the delegates asked people at a rural clinic whether men could stay with their wives during childbirth, "they all laughed."<sup>54</sup> For the Americans, this was a significant victory of the women's health movement (in that it allowed women patients rather than medical authorities to choose who was present during childbirth) and an important step in overcoming traditional gender norms, but for the Chinese it was beyond serious consideration. A conversation about sexual liberation also clearly made the Chinese hosts uncomfortable, and the situation did not improve when the visitors pointed out that Engels had lived with his girlfriend. Moreover, the Americans "drove the Chinese hosts nuts" with their insistence on having a rotating leadership. To the delegates, this was a key aspect of their anti-hierarchical organizational politics, but at the insistence of their hosts they ultimately opted to assign one of the women as their permanent liaison.<sup>55</sup>

Given their political commitments, it is not surprising that the delegates would later write in their 1974 book, *China: Science Walks on Two Legs*, "We saw China as the Chinese presented it and readily admit that we believed what we saw and heard."<sup>56</sup> Indeed, reading the travel journal of one of the delegates gives a clear impression of how well the trip fulfilled their greatest hopes and dreams. Upon leaving Xigou Commune (in southeastern Shanxi Province), he wrote, "We... couldn't help but feel we had some kind of gut understanding for why the peasants love Chairman Mao. Ravine after ravine terraced to the brim. Hopeless land brought into production."<sup>57</sup>

Nonetheless, it would be wrong to assume that the delegate's acceptance of Cultural Revolution political orientations stemmed simply from a lack of critical thought. The journal frequently points to the traveler's willingness to evaluate the merits of what he saw and heard. He was on the alert for what he termed "rhetoric" in his informants' statements. After one exchange, he wrote: "In the evening we... interviewed two 'students' working in commune. The girl looked cityish + gave a very retorical [sic.] interview largely read from a notebook." And when he returned to the United States, he reviewed his notes and compared them with other sources. For example, his entry from a visit to a rural health clinic indicates that venereal disease had been "wiped out since the beginning of liberation all over China,"

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52 Letter from Dan Connell to SESP China Group, no date, in author's collection.

53 This comes from the 21 February entry in a travel journal loaned to me by a delegate who prefers to remain anonymous. Hereafter SftP Delegate Journal.

54 SftP Delegate Journal. The encounter occurred at Red Star Commune outside Beijing.

55 Interview with anonymous delegate. Judy Greenberg raised some of these same points at a 1 May 1977 meeting of the China Study Group of the Berkeley chapter of Science for the People. "CSG Newsletters" folder, Box 5, Science for the People papers (MC 498), Institute Archives and Special Collections, MIT Libraries, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

56 Science for the People, *China: Science Walks on Two Legs* (New York: Avon, 1974), 5.

57 SftP Delegate Journal.

but he later wrote in the margins, "Contradicted in Greene 1960."<sup>58</sup> And the book *Science for the People* did not shy from discussing serious concerns about occupational health and safety, though the authors did express confidence that once sufficient industrial experience led to better knowledge of the problems, such knowledge would not be kept from the workers as it is in capitalist societies like the United States.<sup>59</sup>

Beyond this small dose of healthy skepticism, other factors contributed to a sense of distance between the visitors and the visited. At Xigou commune, perhaps the high point of the entire trip, several members experienced a profound feeling of alienation. After an inexplicably "depressing" tour of the water conservancy project, two delegates "walked up hill in back of building + talked for half hour ... trying to figure out why we were generally down." They concluded that their "complete inability to communicate with people around us was a big factor."<sup>60</sup>

Despite sometimes feeling estranged, the Science for the People delegation returned from China greatly impressed and inspired by what they had seen, and they largely embraced the perspectives on science and politics they had encountered there. From their journal entries to the finished book, the narrative they told about science and the transformation of Chinese society rang true to the dominant historical narrative expressed in 1973 China. "Before liberation" only a privileged few could afford health care, private land ownership prevented developments in agriculture, and foreign powers controlled industry. "Since liberation," great strides had been made in all sectors of society despite the destructive policies of Liu Shaoqi and his followers. Already in the early 1950s, Liu had argued for "mechanization before cooperation" – in other words for keeping agriculture a private enterprise until industry had been nationalized and farming mechanized.<sup>61</sup> Then, following the success of the Great Leap Forward, Liu had attempted to derail rural light industry, compelling the peasants to fall behind the cities once again.<sup>62</sup> But "since the Cultural Revolution," Liu Shaoqi's erroneous line had been overcome with excellent results for agriculture, industry, health care, scientific research, and education.

This was the historical backdrop to the main story of *Science Walks on Two Legs*: the spectacular scientific successes of communist China. While the Maoist slogan "walking on two legs" meant many things (using both the old and the new, the Chinese and the foreign, small-scale and large-scale development, etc.), its primary significance for Science for the People was the principle of engaging both professional and popular science. Training peasants to become "barefoot doctors" brought primary health care to the most remote villages. Sending scientists into the fields to work with peasants helped the scientists better understand the practical applications of their research. Integrating college engineering classes and electronics production offered benefits for students and workers alike.

In addition to publishing the book, the delegates also engaged in more intimate forms of outreach. Pooling their photographs, they assembled slide shows and developed talks for a wide range of audiences: grade school and college classes, political study groups, libraries, community groups, church groups, and at least one group of prisoners – not to mention friends and family. Minna Goldfarb gave talks at universities not only in the United States but also in England and France.<sup>63</sup> Many less formal gatherings were held in living rooms and some included potluck dinners. By 1975 delegates had delivered more than two hundred such talks.<sup>64</sup>

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58 This refers to a report by the journalist Felix Greene, who was one of the most outspoken Western promoters of communist China.

59 *Science for the People, China*, 97-99.

60 SftP Delegate Journal. Note that this came from a separate volume the delegate kept to record his personal reflections.

61 *Science for the People, China*, 53.

62 *Science for the People, China*, 36.

63 Interview with Barrett.

64 "Draft Proposal for China Trip," "Northeast Regional Conference, 1975" folder, Box 3, Science for the People papers (MC 498), Institute Archives and Special Collections, MIT Libraries, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Note that this was a

Upon their return, several of the delegates quickly connected with local chapters of the U.S.-China People's Friendship Association. It was, as one delegate remembers, "a natural fit." The Friendship Association chapters had contact lists of people eager to hear first-hand reports of socialism in China, and they were well connected with other sympathetic groups as well.

The Friendship Association emerged in 1970 and within a few years had chapters across the country, often formed by people already active in other left-leaning organizations.<sup>65</sup> In the early years, the organization's chief official focus was the normalization of political relations between the United States and China. However, local activists were often relatively uninterested in normalization and far more passionate about bringing a vision of socialist success to the American people. By 1974, the Friendship Association was sending its own delegations of activists on tours of China, who returned to deliver slide shows and invite other speakers who had been to China and could paint the pictures people longed to see.<sup>66</sup> A good example is Frances Crowe, in 1973 director of the American Friends Service Committee's office in western Massachusetts. (AFSC had been active since 1964 in promoting relations between the United States and China and had sent a delegation to China in 1972.<sup>67</sup>) Crowe received a letter from the Friendship Association asking her to recommend someone to travel with the East Coast Activists tour then being organized. Since no one else was available, she decided to go herself. When she returned, she helped found and run a chapter of the Friendship Association. She gave many slide shows and talks in the area and also invited many guest speakers.<sup>68</sup>

While Science for the People was principally concerned with the sciences, its members did not limit themselves to such topics, but rather sought to put a "human face" on China and so focused on the daily lives of the people they encountered. A favorite slide in the show of one delegate depicted the big, bearded chemist Marvin Kalkstein face-to-face with a young Chinese boy (it was titled "Boy meets Marv K."). On the other side, while the Friendship Association had no specific interest in science, technology, or medicine, these subjects were important elements in their slide shows. For example, Frances Crowe's lecture notes include an index card explaining how the Cultural Revolution sought to reshape the thinking of Chinese scientists and overturn the elitist notion that the "quest for pure knowledge is the highest goal."<sup>69</sup> Local chapters often invited speakers to address questions of science and especially medicine in the PRC (for example the physicians Victor Sidel and Samuel Rosen), and the Friendship Association had a booth focusing on sustainable technology at the 1977 Toward Tomorrow Fair at the University of Massachusetts.<sup>70</sup>

Like Science for the People, members of the Friendship Association typically had political commitments that overlapped in important ways with socialist Chinese political discourse. They drew inspiration from the way Mao had mobilized the population in the struggle to improve poor people's lives and build a society based on collectivist values. This was what both groups sought to convey in

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proposal for a second trip, discussed below. One delegate's personal list details forty-eight presentations from 1973 to 1977 (in author's collection).

65 Douglas P. Murray, "Exchanges with the People's Republic of China: Symbols and Substance," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 424 (March, 1976): 29-42, 36.

66 As with Science for the People, the tours were run by the company Special Tours for Special People, Inc., which specialized in travel for progressive intellectuals.

67 Madsen, *China and the American Dream*, 32-33; American Friends Service Committee, *Experiment without Precedent: Some Quaker Observations on China Today* (n.p., May, 1972).

68 Interview with Frances Crowe. Also Frances Crowe papers, Smith College Special Collections. Boxes # 1, 9, 10, 11.

69 Frances Crowe papers, Box 8. The phrase was also noted in a *New York Times* article that drew on Galston and Signer's observations. Walter Sullivan, "Peking Aiming Research at China's Special Needs," *New York Times*, 7 July 1971: 1, 14.

70 Frances Crowe papers, Box 10. Indeed, if we recognize agriculture, industry, and health care as key concerns for science – as socialists consistently argue we should – we quickly see that any discussion of Chinese society would invariably touch frequently on issues of science.

their slide shows and other outreach activities.

### 1975: Pests and Professors

"Gordon saw three roaches in hotel."<sup>71</sup> A visitor to China in 1975 when he wrote this in his journal, Robert Metcalf was not complaining, and neither was his colleague and informant Gordon Guyer. They were part of the American Insect Control Delegation, a group of entomologists organized by the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China who had come to learn about recent Chinese work in their field. Before arriving in China, they had heard reports of the ambitious Chinese campaign to sweep away the "four pests." Metcalf determined to count for himself. He focused especially on flies: each time he saw a fly, he immediately recorded it in his journal. If he saw one fly, he wrote "1d"; if two flies, "2d." (The "d" probably stood for Diptera, the taxonomic order of true flies.) On August 7<sup>th</sup> he wrote: "Put down for lunch...at Shen-yang... Had century old egg, roast duck, best soup yet. After this magnificent meal, proprietor said, if we would give him a little notice he would have a much better meal when we returned. Saw 3d in toilet."<sup>72</sup>

Metcalf's journal entries were almost always very matter-of-fact. Banquet menus, lists of insect pests, and notes from lectures and meetings documented what he tasted, saw, and heard. Only occasionally did he note his own thoughts or feelings about these experiences. When recording interviews with scientists and officials, his entries typically reflected quite clearly the Maoist discourse that filled the speech of his informants:

Under oppression of imperialism, feudalism, and capitalism peasants unable to control pests. After liberation under wise leadership of Mao, people paid much attention to pest control.<sup>73</sup>

Especially after cultural revolution we adopted demonstration and popularization – extension work. Now every place in Province has established propagation of *Trichogramma* [a parasitic wasp] – and have basically controlled such insect damage. Mass movement of *Trichogramma* to control various forest pests is expanded. In recent years in carrying out Chair. Mao's scientific revolutionary line – independence.<sup>74</sup>

So familiar did this rhetoric become that Metcalf soon started using shorthand like "Before \_\_\_" or "Before L" to represent "Before liberation."<sup>75</sup>

Reading such transcripts, it is hard to tell whether there was any real political charge behind the rhetoric of the entomology group's Chinese hosts. On at least one occasion, however, the politics becomes much more tangible and obviously relevant to the international exchange.

Evening meal very lavish. RLM [i.e., Metcalf] ill with dysentery. At toasts Carl H. spoke of similarities between Americans and Chinese including appreciation of food and beautiful women. Interpreter didn't mention this but old Su got up and delivered diatribe about equality of women, why didn't we have one on team, etc. Sore point.<sup>76</sup>

"Old Su" (Su Fenglin, a man) was a member of the Chinese Association for Science and Technology and the leader of the Chinese group hosting the American delegation. The twelve Americans were all

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71 Robert L. Metcalf, China Trip Notebook 3, 25 August 1975, Box 20, Robert L. Metcalf Papers, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Archives (hereafter Metcalf notebook).

72 Metcalf notebook 1, 7 August 1975.

73 Metcalf notebook 3, 23 August 1975.

74 Metcalf notebook 1, 9 August 1975.

75 Metcalf notebooks 1 and 2, see for example 20 August 1975.

76 Metcalf notebook 1, 8 August 1975. Carl H. was the entomologist Carl Huffaker.

male and had arrived in China at a moment when feminism was an explicit political priority.

Metcalf very occasionally expressed some weariness with the persistently political language he heard. When visiting Mao's hometown, he wrote: "Pep talk about humble life of Mao and miserable life of peasants – a constant reiteration."<sup>77</sup> And at a puppet show in Xi'an, he wrote: "Puppets very dextrous but repetitious and full of revolutionary themes."<sup>78</sup>

More serious are the recorded questions and answers on environmental and health consequences of pesticide use. Above the following entry, Metcalf later wrote "important."

[Q.] Pesticide applicators and question of their health? How do you keep track of this problem?

[A.] When we apply O-P [organophosphate] insecticide have rules established by Ministry of Agriculture – also dept in communes. If we use dangerous insecticides, how to use apparatus, protective mask or skin protection.

Q. We also have rules but still have problems. Do you not have problems?

[A.] Also have barefoot doctors. Sometimes we also have poisoning – "to very few persons."

The discussion went on to cover safety measures surrounding organophosphates at the brigade level, and then turned to other environmental and health concerns.

Q. Everywhere we go in People's Republic we smell BHC [a pesticide]. Is there concern about storage of B-isomer in human tissues or in human milk.

A. This is also for the consideration of the Public Health Ministry, and also the station involved with health of man and health of animals.

Metcalf then summarized the point: "No feedback from Ministry of Health to Entomologists making recommendations – the Entomologists seem to show concern?"<sup>79</sup>

But far more common than these worrisome points were entries detailing the positive steps Metcalf and his American colleagues witnessed in the realm of what they called "integrated pest management" and their Chinese hosts referred to as "integrated control." Intensive sanitation efforts prevented flies; light traps with bait made from wine, sugar, and vinegar drowned moths; parasite wasps attacked harmful caterpillars; chickens ate bollworms; and great numbers of agricultural laborers kept meticulous notes on pest populations to help target interventions and reduce the amount of chemicals used. And all throughout, Metcalf kept up with his fly inventory: "Pigery – large number, very clean, no flies. 1d in car"; "Pigs and cows cleanest I've ever seen. Virtually no flies. Cows in dairy nearly fly free. Saw perhaps 200 flies in entire farm area."<sup>80</sup>

Robert Metcalf's China journal, though matter-of-fact in tone, conveys a strikingly positive picture of insect control as practiced in the People's Republic. When he returned to the United States, he and a few fellow delegates shared their findings in the opening plenary session of a large meeting of the Entomological Society of America. According to UC Berkeley entomologist Robert van den Bosch, two thousand people attended the presentation and heard the excitement with which the delegates reported on Chinese efforts to reduce pesticide use and pursue integrated control methods.<sup>81</sup> This was a driving concern for entomologists in the United States, who were facing growing pest resistance alongside ever-mounting evidence of the environmental consequences of pesticides. They were searching for inspiration and for evidence that would boost their efforts to promote new and better approaches. It helped their cause to find active pursuit of integrated pest management in the People's

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77 Metcalf notebook 1, 24 August 1975.

78 Metcalf notebook 2, 16 August 1975.

79 Metcalf notebook 2, 19 August 1975.

80 Metcalf notebooks 1 and 2, 24 August 1975, 20 August 1975.

81 Robert van den Bosch, *The Pesticide Conspiracy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1980 [1978]), 129.

Republic of China.

The notes for this presentation are unfortunately unavailable, but an article Metcalf later wrote for *Environment* highlighted the key points. (Launched in 1969, *Environment* is a magazine published by Scientists' Institute for Public Information for the purpose of educating the public about science relevant to environmental issues.<sup>82</sup>) The article did not discuss any of the safety issues that appeared in Metcalf's journal; it included no mention that "everywhere" the delegates went they "smelled BHC." Rather, China appeared as a virtual paragon of healthy productivity. China was "essentially self-sufficient in producing food for its billion persons" despite its relatively small amount of arable land. With retired workers volunteering for sanitation duties, "manure scarcely hits the road before it is swept up and recycled into agricultural production," making China "the world's cleanest society." And, of course, Metcalf announced the results of his fly census (summed not very accurately from his journal): a "grand total" of 39. Most importantly, Chinese scientists, with government support, were weaning agriculture from excessive use of chemical insecticides through such biological controls as parasitic wasps and insect-eating ducks. The editors of *Environment* were so taken by this latter example that they over-rode Metcalf's descriptive but staid title "Integrated Insect Pest Management in the People's Republic of China," and instead ran the headline "China Unleashes Its Ducks."<sup>83</sup>

A far more detailed account of the delegation's findings appeared in 1977 in the form of a book-length report, which described the many insect pest problems China faced along with the control techniques currently used and under study. As with Metcalf's article in *Environment*, the report was highly favorable. The authors went so far as to write, "Clearly, the Chinese have progressed beyond levels attained in the United States both in widespread enthusiasm for integrated control and, in many respects, in the application of the ecological principles fundamental to its development."<sup>84</sup> This statement was the authors' expressed opinion; in other places, the Chinese state's voice can be heard in an almost unmediated fashion. For example, the description of the Foshan City Patriotic Hygiene Movement Unit reads in part: "In hygiene work, the former backwardness of Foshan has been altered by a mass effort to change the environmental outlook, substituting hygienic habits for old superstitions, and by carrying out disease-prevention work."<sup>85</sup>

Scientists consulting the volume had the good fortune to hear from a true China expert, since the introductory section was penned by none other than Harvard professor of Chinese politics Benjamin Schwartz. Like others of his generation, Schwartz had long studied China from afar, but his first opportunity to visit came as a tag-along with the American Insect Control Delegation.<sup>86</sup> Zhou Enlai had arranged with the Committee on Scholarly Communication to welcome natural scientists in a range of fields, but a delegation of China scholars was explicitly off the table.<sup>87</sup> The two sides agreed, however, to allow one China scholar to accompany each delegation.<sup>88</sup> Though expert on China, Schwartz was thus thrust into an oddly amateur position, and he appropriately titled his contribution "Impressions of

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82 On Scientists' Institute for Public Information, see Kelly Moore, "Organizing Integrity: American Science and the Creation of Public Interest Organizations, 1955-1975," *The American Journal of Sociology* 101.6 (May, 1996): 1592-1627

83 Robert L. Metcalf, "China Unleashes Its Ducks," *Environment* 18.9 (1976): 14-17. Metcalf accidentally missed the journal entry with 200 flies cited above. The editors' note suggests that Metcalf may have been displeased by the title change and wished to be disassociated from it.

84 American Insect Control Delegation, *Insect Control in the People's Republic of China: A Trip Report of the American Insect Control Delegation, Submitted to the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences, 1977), 142.

85 American Insect Control Delegation, *Insect Control*, 183.

86 Fred Wakeman's first trip was with a delegation of medical doctors. Joseph Esherick, personal communication.

87 Wang, "U.S.-China Scientific Exchange," 255.

88 Madsen, *China and the American Dream*, 98.

an Entomological Layman." His background gave him a somewhat more critical eye than his fellow delegates had. He expressed concern over what appeared to be a "total repression of popular religion," and he noted that for all the talk of mass participation, they had witnessed participation only in policy implementation and not in decision making. Still, the overall picture he painted was highly positive and consistent with Metcalf's. He highlighted the importance placed on "self-reliance," noting comments from the American delegates on the Chinese willingness to work in "austerely furnished laboratories," in contrast with "young American research scientists" who demanded "the most expensive and sophisticated equipment." He concluded, "I came away with an impression of striking accomplishments in agriculture, public health, and insect control." And despite controls in the realm of education and culture, he did not find "high ideological tension in the lives of the people," but rather had "the impression of a deep immersion on the part of most people in the course of their private and familial lives."<sup>89</sup>

### 1978: New Complications for China's Foreign Friends

The death of Mao and fall of the newly identified "Gang of Four" in 1976, followed by the rise in 1978 of Deng Xiaoping and his moderate policies, created confusion for leftist visitors to China and their home organizations -- especially the U.S.-China People's Friendship Association, which had an explicitly "friendly" relationship with the Chinese government and had advocated strongly for the radical principles that government had once espoused. With the PRC's enormous transformation, where did the Friendship Association's loyalties lie? A member of both Science for the People and the Friendship Association in Chicago recalls that "some people couldn't bring themselves to see that things were really changing."<sup>90</sup> They wanted to believe that China's new leaders were maintaining its core socialist principles. Others saw real change but withheld judgment on its political significance. Still others saw and opposed the changes. In 1978, members of the Seattle chapter of the Friendship Association sent a letter to the other locals complaining that the National Steering Committee had attempted to prevent them from discussing concerns about the recent trends in China away from socialism. Racial tensions between black and white members contributed to the problem. The Nassau chapter reportedly had similar troubles, leading to the resignation of many members.<sup>91</sup> Despite such difficulties, the Friendship Association weathered the awkward transition and maintained its support for the Chinese state. "Activist tours" for people directly involved with the association and "friendship tours" for people with a general interest in China continued to bring Americans to the People's Republic and provide an upbeat introduction to the society and daily life there.

Science for the People also maintained its interest in China and worked after 1976 with the Friendship Association to further normalization of U.S.-Chinese relations.<sup>92</sup> Meanwhile, China study groups in the Boston, Stony Brook, Ann Arbor, Tallahassee, and Berkeley chapters were discussing the possibility of a second trip.<sup>93</sup> A thank-you letter to Zhou Peiyuan in fall 1975 had already broached the subject, and in early 1977, members of Science for the People exchanged letters and phone calls with the PRC Liaison Office in Washington, D.C.<sup>94</sup> But already in the early stages of the planning, the group encountered new complications. At a 10 May 1977 meeting of all the China Study Groups, the Boston

89 American Insect Control Delegation, *Insect Control*, 3-6.

90 Interview with anonymous.

91 Frances Crowe papers, Box 8.

92 Boston China Study Group, "China Study Group Presentation at Voluntown, Conn.," "CSG – Misc, Minutes, Corresp" folder, Box 4, Science for the People papers (MC 498), Institute Archives and Special Collections, MIT Libraries, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

93 Boston China Study Group, "China Study Group Presentation."

94 "CSG – Misc, Minutes, Corresp" folder, Box 4, Science for the People papers (MC 498), Institute Archives and Special Collections, MIT Libraries, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

group highlighted several problems. Many of the people interested in traveling to China had joined the discussions only recently and were unfamiliar with Science for the People as an organization. Political perspectives diverged widely and arguments arose as to the relationship between the goals of Science for the People and the goals of this specific trip to China. Some members of the China Study Group ended up feeling "alienated" by these developments, and five active members left the group.<sup>95</sup>

Having resolved these issues to the remaining members' satisfaction, the chapters selected twelve people to serve on the delegation.<sup>96</sup> Although once again treated with great – often lavish – hospitality, the delegates on this trip were far more divided in their reactions. Age played a role: the visitors were on average older this time around and thus tended to be somewhat less optimistic.<sup>97</sup> But China was also changing. With the discrediting of the Gang of Four, intellectuals were already beginning to speak about their negative experiences during the Cultural Revolution. The delegation met with one intellectual in Guangzhou who was "very bitter" that the time he spent in the countryside had impeded his work. This was "an eye-opener" for some of the delegates.<sup>98</sup>

Hearing truths from intellectuals was disturbing and disheartening, but hearing the new political line from officials was perhaps even more disorienting. A travel journal from a former member of Science for the People who visited China with a Friendship Association delegation in 1978 vividly illustrates the challenges visitors faced trying to swallow the new story. At a commune near Shanghai, she wrote: "Influence of G of 4... Some students were labeled bourgeois experts. Putting intelligence first was another label applied." The next day at the Shanghai Municipal Women's Federation, she wrote: "Good teachers were labeled as 'putting professional studies in command.' Gang of 4 labelled [sic.] students who worked hard as 'bourgeois experts.'"<sup>99</sup> Not only were such stories repeated *ad nauseum*, but they also invalidated much of what had so inspired earlier visitors.

As with the first group of Science for the People visitors, the 1978 delegation was appalled by working conditions, but this time they were far less satisfied with the explanations.<sup>100</sup> A founding member of Science for the People who traveled to China in 1979 with a Marxist-Leninist group, composed mostly of 1930s labor leaders, tells a similar story. He remembers that each place they went they sat down for highly structured meetings with authorities. If they criticized anything (usually about occupational health and safety), they invariably heard that the problem was the fault of the Gang of Four. Finally, during a visit to a steel mill, the visitor "talked back," saying, "No, it's not the Gang of Four." This protest was met with silence; his hosts "couldn't deal with it."<sup>101</sup> Such interactions greatly reduced the credibility of the Chinese hosts in the eyes of even the most sympathetic visitors.

Nevertheless, upon returning from China, several of the Science for the People delegates were enthusiastic about what they had seen. Two delegates wrote a two-part series for *Science for the People* magazine entitled "Food and Agriculture in China." They began by acknowledging they had "reservations about certain aspects of recent developments," but took the Western press to task for its "unabashed glee" in reporting that such developments were signs that "once again socialism is foundering." Rather, they argued that Chinese socialism had succeeded in producing and delivering food to its population and that "the Chinese are committed to maintaining and building on the basic

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95 Boston China Study Group, "China Study Group Presentation."

96 SftP China Delegation, "Second SftP China Trip: Itinerary Report," *Science for the People* 10.5 (Sept./Oct. 1978): 37-38, 38.

97 Interview with Eric Entemann. While the link between youth and optimism is admittedly trite, several former members of Science for the People identified it as a factor in their experiences.

98 Interview with Entemann.

99 Britta Fischer, 1978 China travel journal (in author's collection), 81-82, 97.

100 Interview with Entemann.

101 Interview with Herb Fox.

components of the system that have made it work so well."<sup>102</sup> But three years after the second delegation returned from China, the members collectively decided to abandon their attempt to complete a second book. The group had been unable "to agree how to present their China experiences in light of the dramatic changes that have taken place there in the months immediately following their visit."<sup>103</sup>

### Common Threads

#### Amateur Experts

Plant physiologist Arthur Galston began the first chapter of his 1973 book *Daily Life in People's China*: "This book about China is not the work of a China expert or even a longtime China-watcher. It is rather an account of the sights, sounds, and feel of life in China today, recorded by an American scientist fortunate enough to be the first admitted to the People's Republic of China since its founding in 1949."<sup>104</sup> The 1970s was an extraordinary time for Americans with little previous knowledge of China to travel there and return as "amateur China experts." The stories they told were strikingly similar despite the very different social identities of the storytellers and their audiences. Scientists returned to deliver presentations at specialist conferences and author articles in professional journals, but also to write popular materials for mass consumption and give talks to church groups. Activists delivered lectures and slide shows for political organizations and community potlucks, but also for college classes. And of course, these social identities were not always mutually exclusive. Some (like Galston and Signer) identified themselves as "scientists" but were in fact also politically active. Others (like several on the Science for the People delegation) identified first as activists but were in fact also practicing scientists at research institutions. While some of the specific content of their stories varied, the visitors consistently emphasized the same overarching themes: the successful pursuit of "self-reliance" and "self-sufficiency," the commitment to egalitarian values, the emphasis on science that serves practical needs in society, the health and spiritual wellbeing of the population, and above all the "human face" of the socialist Chinese.

It is in fact a bit odd that these fortunate travelers should have portrayed themselves – and been so widely received – as possessing a rare form of knowledge about Chinese society. Throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, China watchers had ready access to the PRC state's voice through its media.<sup>105</sup> Thus, foreigners knew quite a bit about what the state claimed to be doing. There were also "eye-witness" reports from "foreign friends" who had been permitted to settle in China after the revolution (like William Hinton, Rewi Alley, and the medical doctors George Hatem and Joshua Horn), from visitors permitted to take tours (like Simone de Beauvoir) or observe commune life for several weeks (like Jan Myrdal), and even from former U.S. spies like Allyn and Adele Rickett, who spent four years in a Chinese prison and lived to sing the praises of thought reform.<sup>106</sup> And in 1971, there were in fact a great many non-U.S. foreigners in China: Galston and Signer saw hotels bustling with "myriad

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102Michael K. Hansen and Stephen J. Risch, "Food and Agriculture in China, Part I," *Science for the People* 11.3 (May/June, 1979): 39-45, 39.

103Ted Goldfarb and Judy Weinstein, "Since the Cultural Revolution: Science Policy Changes in China," *Science for the People* 13.2 (March/April, 1981): 11-15, 11.

104Galston, *Daily Life*, 1.

105The Chinese state published the English-language periodicals *Peking Review* and *China Reconstructs*, which were widely available in the United States. In addition, the United States government collected media reports from within China and published translations under the titles *Survey of China Mainland Press* and *Selections from China Mainland Magazines*; China scholars frequently cited these sources in their writings.

106The best historical overview of foreigners in the People's Republic of China is Anne-Marie Brady, *Making the Foreign Serve China: Managing Foreigners in the People's Republic* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

foreign businessmen from all countries."<sup>107</sup> It is true that China watchers had somewhat less specific knowledge of scientific research then underway in China, and during the early years of the Cultural Revolution there was an uneasy (or for some, tantalizing) sense that big changes were afoot behind largely opaque curtains. But most of what returned visitors in the 1970s had to share with their eager audiences differed little from what could already have been gathered from reading Horn, Myrdal, Hinton, *Peking Review* and *China Reconstructs*, and the translations of Chinese media available through the Foreign Broadcast Information Service. So what made the testimony of the 1970s visitors so valuable to Americans at large? Perhaps it was the idea that someone "like them" had made it to China. The intimacy of a professional colleague writing in a familiar journal or a neighbor giving a talk in a friend's living room provided both a sense of trust and the exciting feeling of vicariously venturing into an unknown country.

All of this raises interesting questions about expertise, authority, and in turn "professional" versus "popular" accounts of Chinese history and culture. Of all the people quoted in this article, the only one recognized as a true scholar of China was Benjamin Schwartz. Ironically, he traveled to China not as a "China expert" but as an "entomological layman." To my knowledge, Schwartz did not publish an account of his visit in any journal for China scholars. Rather, he recorded his "impressions" – a word he used repeatedly – in the formal report of the American Insect Control Delegation and so instead served an audience that, while "professional" in the biological sciences, was solidly outside the profession of China watchers. The entomological professional Robert Metcalf told China stories that served largely the same purpose and the same audience. His presentation at the entomology meeting could not have offered much in the way of new scientific information, but it did introduce thousands of entomologists to the culturally and politically exotic land of China.

In some cases, China visitors explicitly faced and addressed questions of "professionalism" and "expertise." For members of Science for the People, professionalism was a part of the larger politics of science in the United States that they sought to combat – and was in fact one of the chief areas in which they hoped to learn from socialist Chinese experience. Those who had professional credentials thought carefully about how to use them to promote political and social change without assuming an elitist attitude about the knowledge others offered. (In their *Science* article, Signer and Galston hinted that they too were sympathetic to anti-elitist struggle: "hopefully" the Chinese working classes "will never again be in the position of having to trust a privileged class of educated 'experts' who know all about things that are beyond their comprehension."<sup>108</sup>) Given their commitment to overturning professional elitism in their own fields, it is not surprising that members of Science for the People had little trouble moving into the territory of China experts and daring to assume they too had knowledge about China to impart.

The People's Friendship Association also actively encouraged its members to overturn attitudes of professionalism. In a 1977 summary of a recent speakers' workshop, the Boston chapter noted a few problems with recent speaking work.

(1) Our main task is to bring education about China to the American people, yet our own limited knowledge has meant that individual speakers have not known how to face difficult questions and have shied away from this task. (2) This has encouraged a professionalist attitude which must be broken down. Any active USCPFA [Friendship Association] member should be able to speak about China.<sup>109</sup>

The authority to "speak about China" came from knowledge readily available to Friendship Association

<sup>107</sup>Signer journal, 10 May 1971. See also Durdin, "China: The Open Door," E2.

<sup>108</sup>Signer and Galston, "Education and Science," 17.

<sup>109</sup>Frances Crowe papers, "Sum-Up of the Speakers Workshop," 16 April 1977 (Box 10).

members. Although the authors of this summary cautioned speakers to recognize the geographical diversity of China and its rapid changes over recent years, it is nonetheless clear that the speakers' greatest authority derived from their personal experiences in China – what they saw and heard with their own eyes and ears. Arthur Galston similarly located his authority to speak on China in his personal experiences rather than any professional knowledge. He quickly gave up delivering lectures on acupuncture in China since he recognized he did not have the expertise needed to answer the challenges of medical specialists. Instead, he insisted on giving more general talks on the people of China: traveling in China apparently could give that kind of expertise.

But how trustworthy was such evidence? Tenured professors and community organizers alike were repeatedly called to defend their reasons for believing their eyes and ears. And their audiences had reason for suspicion. The stories these China visitors told largely conformed to the propaganda of the PRC state. Indeed, one of the key organizations involved – the Friendship Association – was explicitly involved in advocating for diplomatic recognition of the People's Republic, and the main office frequently sent to its chapter organizers official "red-head" statements from the Chinese government. Even scientists like Metcalf, who held no explicit political commitments, dutifully copied the political language of their informants into their journals. And while the historical narrative Metcalf heard – the one that became so familiar he wrote in terms of before and after "L" – did not make a direct appearance in his *Environment* article, it certainly informed his assertions that "since 1950" 120 million people had worked to "remake" the Yellow River flood plain, with the result that the locust problems that had long plagued the area had been "nearly eliminated."<sup>110</sup>

Skeptics wondered if the visitors had been shown "Potemkin Villages," and some even explicitly criticized their apparent willingness to believe everything they were told. Friendship Association member Frances Crowe recalls being challenged on several occasions. Following a talk at Dartmouth College, the journalist Jonathan Mirsky was highly critical of her "overboard" enthusiasm for Chinese socialism. Later, on a visit to East Germany, Crowe met a man who took her and her husband back to his home so that he could set them straight on China. He had been there during the Cultural Revolution and told them "what had really happened." Crowe did not lose her enthusiasm for the Chinese revolution, but she did begin to read the periodic letters Bill Hinton circulated "a bit more carefully."<sup>111</sup>

People defended their stories on a number of grounds. For the most mainstream scientists, lack of political commitment could itself be a help. As van den Bosch said of the Insect Control Delegation after their presentation to the Entomological Society, the panelists were "politically moderate Middle Americans" with "no ax to grind on behalf of China and its Marxist political ideology." Rather, they "reported things as they witnessed and recorded them."<sup>112</sup> Arthur Galston and Ethan Signer similarly defended their reports by saying that they were simply relating what they had seen and heard without adding any spin of their own. In their case, however, this was a response to accusations that they had failed to bring any critical analysis to their observations. Galston and Signer recognized that they had no way of verifying scientifically everything they had witnessed and thus opted to "avoid editorial comment... and specify what we saw and what we were told, leaving the reader to make his or her own judgment."<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, many of the visitors – from Galston the botanist to Schwartz the China scholar – frequently referred to their "impressions" of Chinese society, suggesting an acknowledgment of the limits to knowledge attained through travel.

Visitors typically recognized that China was a big place and they had not seen everything; they

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110Metcalf, "China Unleashes," 15.

111Interview with Crowe.

112Van den Bosch, *The Pesticide Conspiracy*, 129-130.

113Del Jones et al, "North Vietnamese Science," 178.

also usually acknowledged that the places they saw were models. As Galston put it, "While I am sure that the Chinese did not take us to see any feature of their society of which they were ashamed and that they put their best foot forward in every possible instance, I am equally sure we could not have been completely misled."<sup>114</sup> A Science for the People delegate who today recognizes the limits of what they witnessed still insists that they "saw enough to know that the picture in the U.S. press of a huge gulag of starving people was patently false." The pictures they took of "crowds all with fat cheeks" were obviously not staged by the Chinese government.<sup>115</sup> On the other side, visitors often included "plenty of gray" in their photographs, demonstrating that if they were not in a gulag, neither were they in a theme park.<sup>116</sup>

Most if not all of the visitors went to China with a sense that the politics of the Cold War created a distorted image of China. It is thus not surprising that in an attempt to correct this image they should have focused on the positive and most of all on what they saw as the "human" in China. For Minna Goldfarb, the difference between reading a pamphlet on China and attending a slide show by a returned visitor was that the latter could convey much more effectively the extraordinary positive energy of everyday life in China – the people tacking up posters and the children walking arm-in-arm and singing in the streets. And she remembers, "I had beautiful, random pictures – *random* pictures taken out of taxi cabs or official vehicles – of people looking up from the fields with smiles on their faces."<sup>117</sup> Frances Crowe remains certain that she witnessed "people living full, productive lives, what they were meant to do."<sup>118</sup> If this sounds amateurish, recall Benjamin Schwartz's "impression of a deep immersion on the part of most people in the course of their private and familial lives."<sup>119</sup> Indeed, one of the visitors' most common and difficult-to-dispute defenses was their faith in the people they had met. Arthur Galston could not "offer any proof" that the treatment of deaf-mutes in China was successful, but he refused to concede it was "an elaborate charade," because "the spirit that prompts Chinese study and support for it is humane and sincere."<sup>120</sup> Spending time on a commune put him "in touch with ordinary working people whose spontaneous, unfeared and honest reactions confirmed [his] impressions" of the previous year.<sup>121</sup> And most importantly, Galston repeatedly emphasized the free and frank conversations he had enjoyed in English with his friends who had once been colleagues in the United States.

There is a sad coda to this story. In 1971 Loo Shih-wei met Galston in Shanghai and, after the initial awkward airport meeting, spoke enthusiastically about his life in China and the opportunities afforded him by the Cultural Revolution to benefit from peasant wisdom. In 1979, Loo was on a delegation of Chinese botanists to the United States. Sitting on Galston's couch, he burst into tears as he told the "real story" of that encounter. During the early years of the Cultural Revolution, his past life in the United States caught up with him and he was made to wear a dunce cap and shovel pig manure. In fact, Loo was still in the countryside when Galston wrote Loo's name on the visa application. He was greatly startled when he was suddenly called back to Shanghai and returned to his apartment, now cleared of the people who had taken it over. When Galston heard this in 1979, he was "*angry*." He felt he had been "hoodwinked," and he did then start to wonder, for example, whether the acupuncture demonstration had been a charade as well. But Loo maintained that acupuncture anesthesia was valid:

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114Galston, *Daily Life*, 8.

115Interview with anonymous visitor.

116Interview with Britta Fischer.

117Interview with Barrett.

118Interview with Crowe.

119American Insect Control Delegation, *Insect Control*, 3-6.

120Galston, *Daily Life*, 185.

121Galston, "The Chinese University," *Bioscience* 23.2 (Feb., 1973): 74.

Galston had not after all been "completely misled."<sup>122</sup>

Galston and many of the other visitors did intend to bring a critical eye to what they saw. The journals of even the most radical of the activists contain some negative comments about what they witnessed and, perhaps more importantly, skeptical notes about "rhetoric." As Ethan Signer recorded, "In our interviews and visits much of what we hear is the same old CR rhetoric. Nevertheless I feel it is very useful because the way it's employed seems to reveal to me something of how the Chinese view themselves."<sup>123</sup> Thus recording and even repeating rhetoric did not necessarily mean that visitors entirely believed it, although it did suggest that they believed it had some significance for Chinese people.

Perhaps more important than a lack of critical thinking was a lack of the kind of deep cultural understanding needed for an accurate interpretation of personal encounters. Visitors at times expressed frustration at the superficial level of their communication with Chinese people. In other cases, what felt like real human contact might have been cultural miscommunication. For example, I suspect that visitors sometimes misunderstood the laughter they heard. Humor is notoriously difficult to translate: it is often said to be the last thing people learn to understand when studying a foreign language. Laughter in China commonly accompanies embarrassing or awkward situations, but many of the visitors were apparently unaware of this. References to laughter appear very often in visitors' journals and reports in ways that paint Chinese people as extraordinarily jovial, joyful, content, comfortable, and optimistic. Frances Crowe told reporters that Chinese men "giggled" a great deal, in contrast with the American men on the delegation who presumably were too concerned about their masculinity to enjoy a good giggle. Signer often noted the laughter of his hosts, for example at Beijing University where people "laughed heartily" when he described the "American picture of Red Guards." I do not doubt that visitors witnessed considerable happiness or that the people they met often experienced pleasure in the cultural exchange. (And in fact, I believe that visitors made a great number of genuinely friendly and "human" connections with Chinese people.) Nonetheless, if visitors had recognized some of the episodes of laughter as discomfort rather than good humor, their "impressions" of China might have been considerably different. They might have seen more of the political tension that we know infused the lives of people in the Cultural Revolution.

Finally, it is somewhat ironic that the confidence so many returned visitors expressed in their positive impressions of China – and thus their claim to expertise – rested on a humanistic faith in people-to-people contacts. Throughout most of Mao-era China – and especially during the Cultural Revolution – the notion that we are all at base "human" and can connect at that level was officially condemned as a "bourgeois" fallacy that masked fundamental class differences.<sup>124</sup> Ideologically correct Chinese people at the time would have preferred the approach some members of Science for the People emphasized – confronting professionalism as a form of elitism and making a class stand with "the masses." Interestingly, however, even the Science for the People delegates engaged as humanists when they communicated with the larger public. They too sought to put a "human face" on China by sharing endearing photographs and often based their claims to knowledge on the sincerity of the personal interactions they had experienced.

### Learning from China

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122Interview with Galston. Ethan Signer tells a remarkably similar story about a second interview with Lee Cheng-li in 1989 at Beida (interview with Signer).

123Signer journal, 18 May 1971.

124Donald J. Munro, *The Concept of Man in Contemporary China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977), 21; Sigrid Schmalzer, *The People's Peking Man: Popular Science and Human Identity in Twentieth-Century China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

As their critics observed, the returned visitors told stories strikingly similar to what the Chinese state itself said about China, and in many cases (including in scientists' professional writings) they directly echoed official Chinese discourse. Chinese political leaders were no doubt very pleased to have so many new friends willing to help communicate their vision to the larger American public. But the returned visitors themselves were not PRC agents, nor were they always perfect representatives of the organizations to which they belonged. At least in Frances Crowe's case, even as she actively organized events on China in her region, most of the mail from the central office of the Friendship Association – including the official PRC "red-head" communications – went unopened.<sup>125</sup> The visitors had their own reasons for being interested in the China they had experienced and the themes their hosts had highlighted, and their educational efforts were geared toward these reasons more than the goals of the PRC or even their parent institutions (like the Friendship Association's goal of normalization). These reasons are not adequately explained through prior scholarly analytical frames – neither Paul Hollander's "political pilgrims" nor even Richard Madsen's more sympathetic "missionaries of the American dream."

Hollander provides helpful insight into the leftist visitors' search for a "good society" to replace the familiar and dissatisfying ones in which they lived. He rightly points to the many limitations of their experiences and the degree to which they were willingly blind to what should have been matters of grave concern. Nevertheless, his undisguised scorn colors his analysis. He discredits the visitors' political views by explaining them away in terms of social and psychological "estrangement," and so obscures the very important work they were doing to expose problems in Western societies. While radical organizations like Science for the People offered systematic analysis of such problems from a Marxist or Maoist perspective, even politically low-key professionals like the Insect Control Delegation had genuine arguments with American science – in their case, the obstacles to pursuing more environmentally sensible pest control policies.

On the other side, Madsen's focus on the visitors' interest in transforming China into the American dream overshadows what was in fact a very strong theme of "learning from China." He acknowledges that leftists in particular sought a model in China, and he notes the widespread notion that China offered "exciting new opportunities to renew" American institutions.<sup>126</sup> However, the weight of his analysis rests on the theme of the "missionary" eager to teach China American values. Madsen is undoubtedly right that mainstream liberals in the 1970s dreamed of getting back into China to mold it in the American image. The *New York Times* coverage of Galston and Signer's trip to China exemplifies this bias. The article on the American scientists' historic meeting with Zhou Enlai bore the arrogant title "American Scientist Reports He Gave Advice to Chou [Zhou]," and it indeed focused on a few comments Galston made to Zhou in response to Zhou's standard Cultural Revolution-era request for criticism.<sup>127</sup> Ethan Signer made the *New York Times* "Quotation of the Day" with his statement: "We must also say that Chinese scientists admire us as the world leaders in science and they would be glad to accept advice and help if given in the right way. They would benefit from our technology tremendously."<sup>128</sup> But these were distortions of Galston and Signer's own discourse. Galston remembers feeling that the *New York Times* article "trivialized" his meeting with Zhou Enlai. And a careful reader of the full article from which the "Quotation of the Day" was pulled would notice that the "also" referred to a previous sentence emphasizing the "mutual benefit" to China and the United States of future scientific contact, and that Signer and Galston's aim in talking and publishing on their trip was to

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125Frances Crowe papers. Box # 8.

126Madsen, *China and the American Dream*, 115.

127Welles, "American Scientist," 2.

128"Quotation of the Day," *New York Times*, 24 May 1971: 33.

teach the United States about socialist China's unique approaches to science, technology, and medicine.<sup>129</sup>

While many in the United States were doubtless predisposed to a vague belief in some sort of "ancient Chinese wisdom" (and this certainly helps explain the special interest acupuncture anesthesia generated), learning from China was neither an unambiguous nor an uncontested position for visitors to take. Marxist activists and mainstream professional scientists alike had to face the question: how could – or why should – a poor and industrially far less developed country serve as a model for a superpower like the United States? Even in 1972, not all members of Science for the People favored investing energy in a trip to China. Says one former member, "I was not interested in going to China at that time... Some people were looking for models, [but I] didn't see why a backward, emancipated country like China should be a model for an advanced, capitalist society."<sup>130</sup> However, for those who participated in the China Study Groups, the reason to visit China was precisely that it could serve as an example. They studied Mao's writings, actively engaged in criticism/self-criticism, and even adopted Mao's "three-in-one" philosophy of group formation when selecting the members of the first delegation. Their 1974 book *China: Science Walks on Two Legs* was a call for Americans to recognize that another approach to science was possible. In the last few pages, the authors asked:

What can we learn from the models we saw in China about the practice of science in America? ... We share only a few of the problems of an underdeveloped country, but we can ask ourselves whether our practice of science serves to promote continuing advance and freedom for all of us. ... This is not to say that China is "freer" than we are or that we should blindly imitate their models. On the contrary, if we learn nothing else from the Chinese, the lesson that revolutionary change in a society must proceed from its own particular material conditions and the ongoing experience of its people is fundamental, as the Chinese learned from their experience with the Soviet model... We come home committed to a similar struggle here to achieve an American liberation – a liberation rooted in the unique material conditions and cultural heritage of our resourceful people – so that we too can learn to walk on two legs.<sup>131</sup>

A 1975 preliminary proposal for the second delegation called China an "example for progressives" and explained how traveling to China enabled the group to further their outreach work.

[A] trip to China and the outreach work around such a trip can mean that we can advance the understanding of activists in our constituency and can combat bourgeois ideology (e.g. Anticommunism, theories of "human nature," the ideology of "experts rule," etc.) in the population as a whole by describing how people make history, how socialism works, how science for the people is possible only when science (and everything else) is controlled by the people.<sup>132</sup>

Thus, members of Science for the People saw China as a model not because it offered a set of step-by-step instructions for achieving a better society, but because it was a society that had embraced fundamental political principles they thought Americans could profitably adapt to fit their own revolutionary needs. As Ethan Signer (who was also an early member of Science for the People) remembers the group's position, China was "scientifically so backward, it couldn't really be a model, but it might have been a *guide* for what we were trying to do in the United States," for example with respect to egalitarianism.<sup>133</sup>

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129Topping, "U.S. Biologists," 1, 10.

130Interview with Fox.

131Science for the People, *China*, 303-304.

132"Draft Proposal for China Trip."

133Interview with Signer.

Arthur Galston also struggled with the notion that China could be a model for the United States. Today, he and Signer both remember the "primitive" research conditions and find it difficult to recall a sense that America should have sought inspiration from Chinese science.<sup>134</sup> But at the time they emphasized that there was "much to be gained by both parties from a reopening of the channels linking our two countries."<sup>135</sup> Galston remembers that most of the people who invited him to talk were looking for positive stories about China: "then as now people were looking for answers" to the world's problems, and China appeared to offer novel ones.<sup>136</sup> In an article in *Bioscience*, Galston stated that what he had seen "convinced me that China has much to teach the Western world about the organization of production, public health and cooperative living units."<sup>137</sup> In his book, Galston pointed to a few more specific areas ripe for education: for example, Americans could follow China's lead in composting human wastes for fertilizer "instead of dumping them into the rivers and the sea."<sup>138</sup> But still more powerful were the more general lessons China offered Galston: it made him "wonder whether 'human nature' as we know it in the competitive West is the only course of development possible for mankind," and it helped him "question some of the deep-rooted cynicism prevalent in our society."<sup>139</sup>

Given Galston and Signer's activism in the antiwar movement – not to mention the political commitments of Science for the People – it is perhaps not surprising that they should have encouraged Americans to learn from a socialist, Asian country. More striking is the attitude struck by the politically uncommitted Insect Control Delegation. In his *Environment* article, Robert Metcalf expressed enthusiasm for China's commitment to replacing dangerous chemical pesticides with more ecologically sensitive methods of control. He noted that the Chinese government had decided "as early as the 1950s" not to manufacture certain toxic insecticides, and then commented: "This is of great interest to U.S. residents, as enormous quantities of these insecticides have been used in corn production, and the recent banning of their use by the Environmental Protection Agency has caused substantial controversy."<sup>140</sup> Metcalf's politically outspoken colleague Robert van den Bosch put it more bluntly: "it appears as though the Chinese pest-control system has more going for it than ours does."<sup>141</sup> He then went on to contrast China's apparently rational approach to selecting effective, minimally toxic control methods with America's slavery to the pesticide industry, which had shackled even the government's ability to regulate environmentally persistent, toxic chemicals. Here China served as a model not simply because it was an inspiration, but because it was a way to stick it to specific adversaries in the United States. If even China, known to be economically and scientifically "backward," had embraced integrated pest management and rejected the most dangerous pesticides, shouldn't the United States be able to overcome the political pressures that prevented similar progress?

Understanding the political and professional contexts of the China visitors helps to explain how each arrived at their positive "impressions" of China and their expressed interest in using China as a model of one sort or another. Focusing on one specific theme that most visitors highlighted will bring these similarities and differences into still greater focus. All of the visitors discussed here – and a great many more besides – came home impressed by the Chinese commitment to the goals of self-sufficiency and self-reliance, but this had profoundly different meanings for different people.

For many visitors, there was value in the simplicity of the people's lives. Upon her return, Frances Crowe told a newspaper reporter that in China "people seem to be very happy living very

134Interview with Signer; interview with Galston.

135Signer and Galston, "Education and Science in China," 175.

136Interview with Galston.

137Arthur W. Galston, "The University in China," *Bioscience* 22.4 (April, 1972): 217-220.

138Galston, *Daily Life*, 72.

139Galston, *Daily Life*, 240.

140Metcalf, "China Unleashes," 15.

141Van den Bosch, *The Pesticide Conspiracy*, 129.

simply." To illustrate the value of such simplicity, she described the lack of indoor plumbing and the use of nightsoil from outhouses for fertilizer.<sup>142</sup> Crowe and other Quakers (along with many others) embraced simplicity as a core value and so found inspiration in the apparent ability of Chinese people to be content with few material goods and to devote their energies to their larger communities. The Insect Control Delegation similarly expressed pleasure in seeing Chinese graduate students work in "austerely furnished laboratories" to create the equipment and insecticides needed to achieve "self-reliance" in pest control.<sup>143</sup> While for Crowe this was an explicit value held without bashfulness or ambivalence, even the development-oriented scientists frequently found something inspiring about China's scientific primitivism. This inclination was much in keeping with the "small is beautiful" economic philosophy of E. F. Schumacher then influential among many environmentally minded people in the West.

Marxist-inclined organizations like Science for the People similarly celebrated China's commitment to self-sufficiency and self-reliance but held a very different understanding of its significance. For them, technology on a large scale was a good thing. The authors of *Science Walks on Two Legs* took pains to highlight the technological advances China had made and the enormous scale on which the Chinese people were working. They reminded their readers that "communes in China have nothing whatsoever to do with the image that the word 'commune' conjures up in most American minds (i.e. ten hippies on an abandoned farm)." Rather, in China "the people's communes are geographical, administrative, and political units comprising several thousand households each."<sup>144</sup>

One Science for the People delegate remembers that to him the significance of China's "self-sufficiency" was that China could be "utterly independent of a social order [the capitalist U.S.] we despised." When this delegate returned from China, the activist and historian Eugene Feldman invited him to speak to an Afro-American studies class at a prison in Pontiac, Illinois. The African American inmates were "avid" for information about China, and the delegate interpreted their enthusiasm as arising from the welcome idea that "here's a place with no white person in sight doing just fine."<sup>145</sup> Indeed Black Panthers and other black radicals of the era studied Mao's writings and embraced "self-reliance" as a key revolutionary principle.<sup>146</sup>

For Arthur Galston, self-reliance held yet another significance. Writing on the trade fair he attended in Guangzhou, he noted "booths with photographs and literature extolling the efforts of pioneers in reforestation, reclamation of wasteland (especially in the Gobi Desert), and a tide-harnessing project." To Galston, "It all pointed to self-reliance as the basis and heroic self-abnegating labor as the touchstone of progress – and it was somehow reminiscent of an earlier day in America."<sup>147</sup> The "pioneering spirit" he appreciated was not about being satisfied with a simple life; it was about striving for a better, richer one.<sup>148</sup> Like Science for the People, Galston saw beauty in bigness. He noted

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142Sharon Talaber, "City Woman Reflects on Trip She Made to Mainland China," *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, 3 October 1974, 3. From Frances Crowe papers, Smith College Special Collections. Nightsoil had been a special source of inspiration for an earlier generation of Westerners eager to learn from China about the economies of daily life. F. H. King's *Farmers of Forty Centuries* (1911) greatly inspired the early twentieth-century organic farming movement. See Philip Conford, "The Alchemy of Waste: The Impact of Waste on the British Organic Movement," *Rural History* 6.1 (1995): 103-114.

143American Insect Control Delegation, *Insect Control*, 3.

144Science for the People, *China*, 29.

145Eugene Feldman taught the class at a prison in Pontiac, Illinois and invited the Science for the People delegate to give a guest lecture. Interview with anonymous.

146Robin D. G. Kelley and Betsy Esch, "Black Like Mao: Red China and Black Revolution," *Souls* 1.4 (Fall 1999): 6–41.

147Galston, *Daily Life*, 18.

148Interview with Galston.

in his book, "The initial shock upon visiting Malu was its size. Almost six thousand acres are farmed..."<sup>149</sup> Asked in 2007 about the attraction of China for followers of E. F. Schumacher, he replied decisively: "Nothing in China is small."<sup>150</sup> And yet, the appeal of a simple life still found its way into some of his China stories. When describing the method of taking sponge baths in the countryside, Galston noted that people used the dirty water for the plants or spread it carefully in the courtyard to keep down the dust: "Nothing is ever wasted."<sup>151</sup>

These separate but intertwined ways of interpreting and celebrating the common theme of self-reliance suggests an intriguing avenue for inquiry in the study of 1970s American culture. Self-reliance resonated powerfully with different left-leaning and counter-cultural groups in the 1970s. (In addition to the meanings explored above, New Age spirituality also had an important influence on ideas about the self and self-reliance.) It was a flexible enough concept to accommodate highly divergent political positions and philosophical perspectives. Yet it was also robust enough to facilitate communication and cross-pollination among these groups.<sup>152</sup> Americans from a wide spectrum of social and political backgrounds could travel to China, hear about "self-reliance," identify with it, and return to make the concept meaningful to diverse audiences at home.

One of Richard Madsen's key insights in *China and the American Dream* is that Americans continually find in China a reflection of their own values and aspirations. An analysis of the weight 1970s Americans placed on Chinese self-reliance certainly bears this out, with Galston's sentiments about "an earlier day in America" standing as merely the most vivid example -- similarly, egalitarianism and popular education are values deeply etched in American culture. Although their discourse did not always show it, visitors to China in the 1970s celebrated these aspects of socialist China not because they were absent in America, but because they were so central to the visitors' own identities as Americans. But in Madsen's analysis, the missionary impulse dominates and learning appears to proceed almost in a hall of mirrors. In the cases at hand learning emerges as a far more central theme and one that, though certainly related to Americans' self-image, nonetheless carries its own weight. Recognizing the strength of many Americans' desire to learn from China helps in identifying the important role knowledge about China has played in the efforts of liberals and leftists alike to effect social and political change in the United States.

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149Galston, *Daily Life*, 37.

150Interview with Galston.

151Galston, *Daily Life*, 69.

152I benefit here from Star and Griesemer's concept of "boundary objects." Susan Leigh Star and James Griesemer, "Institutional Ecology, 'Translations,' and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907 – 1939," *Social Studies of Science* 19 (1989): 387-420.