

LETTER ON CHINA *By John Walker*



**So very much has changed radically
but so much is still the same.**

You no longer need to lug your baggage across the Shum Chun bridge to the dreary Chinese customs building on the border with the Hong Kong territory.

The sleepy border village with its mud-walled houses, its fish ponds and terraced green rice fields, and its lychee orchards, has disappeared.

Five years of frenzied construction has produced Shenzhen, the open door to the new China. Rising from the lovely hill-bound valley is a forest of skyscrapers bounded by a web of broad avenues, a miniature Hong Kong complete with a massive new rail and customs station roofed in once forbidden Ching dynasty style.

It is a profound shock to one who spent three and a half years of the Cultural Revolution decade in the exciting but often depressing atmosphere of a China stagnating economically but boiling politically.

Shenzhen's 350,000 inhabitants are shopping in well-filled supermarkets, buying the latest Hong Kong tape decks, living in modern apartments, holidaying in the glittering Silver Lake resort, and even making more money than Beijing intellectuals.

But there on the boundary of their zone is the high barbed-wire-topped fence lit by floodlights at night that bars the rest of China from this pseudo-capitalist paradise. Economic freedom meets political repression, a recipe for instability in a Communist-run state.

In the busy port city of Canton, the entrepreneurial Chinese have

been unleashed. On the island in the Pearl River where foreign traders used to be confined in the emperor's time, a joint venture with foreign capital has produced a gleaming new hotel, just one of a dozen new tourist havens in China.

In the special free market streets of Canton, enterprising men and women are selling from tiny stalls everything from blue jeans and jewelry to radios and luggage. The food stalls are crammed with fresh meat, fowl, eggs and fish of a variety and quality never available in state-run shops.

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Bright colors and lively atmosphere have returned to the grey-blue world of Maoist China. The cheery noise of streets crowds, the sprightly sound of bargaining, the raucous cries of hawkers are enlivening every city from Canton to Harbin, from Shanghai to Chengdu.

Music has come back into Chinese life. Not the message-laden operas of Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, but the music of old China and the taped music of the West. In a rooftop dance hall in the old wartime capital of Chongqing, they are playing polkas, waltzes and schottisches, and drinking Coke on the outdoor terrace. In a tiny red-lighted hall in ancient Xian the sounds of Hong Kong jazz drifts out into the night air.

Ai Qing the poet and Mao Dun the novelist are no longer shoveling manure, but are officially honoured and their books readily

available again. In Shanghai in the institute where dunce caps once crowned intellectual heads, young writers express their relief at the "freedom of creation" they are now allowed. In a Shanghai art school, once frustrated painters are sketching the nude model again, trying their hand at abstract styles once banned as counter-revolutionary.

All this has helped to relieve some of the terrible tensions of the last unhappy decade of the Maoist era. Nearly everyone you meet is sick and tired of ideological campaigns, street demonstrations, public struggle sessions, and the instability and bloodshed that went with them.

It is a pleasure, in a month of travel, never to be subjected to

jobs performed for a decade by ill-educated peasants, who now are repairing the gap caused by a leadership that proclaimed "better Red than expert."

But on the dusty plains of Shaanxi province, where as elsewhere the commune has been abolished and peasants with private plots and other incentives are outproducing past records, you still see the basic poverty of the villager. There can be seen the sheer labour of traditional machineless farming, the timeless image of human beings yoked like animals to cartloads of rocks or lumber. You meet "rich" peasants now, but what of the "broad masses"?

Everywhere you hear stories of bureaucrats who cling to sinecures, party bosses who frustrate the modernization process for fear of their jobs or for ideological reasons, and corruption more widespread than ever in Maoist days.

All these forces, as officials in Beijing admit, militate against stability or change. Their looming presence in a vast and backward population makes predictions about the future of this "second revolution" in China rather difficult.

In a modern French-style restaurant in a lavish Beijing hotel, a Chinese economist talks of the spirit of change as being infectious and strong. It worries the ideologues, he says, even as far away as Moscow, where they are watching this experiment closely and perhaps nervously, as they too attempt to face up to change in a Marxist-Leninist environment.

John R. Walker was formerly foreign affairs analyst of Southam News and China bureau chief from 1973-76. He recently spent four weeks in China again.