

This fall, I was a member of a three week tour of China with over a dozen other Americans, mainly workers. We wanted to learn more about current developments in China, especially the political struggle there and the drive to modernize the country by the year 2000. It was a chance to check out first-hand how people live and work in China. It was a chance to learn if the socialist system there really works, if working people can really rule society and run it in the interests of the great majority, instead of a wealthy handful.

We traveled extensively, visiting big cities and smaller areas and agricultural communes in the countryside, where three-quarters of China's peo-

ple live. Everywhere people were open, friendly and quite anxious about us and about America. We felt like honored guests, not outsiders.

Everyone of us left full of respect for the Chinese people and the socialist system under which they have accomplished so much. We are convinced that socialism and communism are the road ahead for the American people as well.

Now, with relations between the US and China normalized and China all over the news, I am writing some articles for the Worker's Voice. They are aimed at giving the paper's readers a worker's-eye view of the People's Republic of China today, starting with how people live in a Chinese city, Shanghai.

China: A worker's-eye view

BY A MIDWEST TRANSIT WORKER

"In the old days, the sky served as a quilt, the ground as a bed, the wind swept the floor." The retired worker in the 'Squatters Village' neighborhood wasn't kidding. He was standing in front of a tiny, raggedy straw hut that couldn't have been much more than four feet high. The local government preserved it to show what misery and horror life in China had been before socialism.

The old guy served us tea in his current home, a three room apartment in a five story building in a housing project. He grinned as he described how "in 1963 when the project was completed and the first tenants moved in there was jubilation, beating drums, crying, drinking and shooting off guns."

Before liberation our host had been a beggar until he got lucky and became a rickshaw puller, dragging rich people all over Shanghai for starvation wages. After liberation when the Chinese Communist Party began reorganizing the country's economy, rickshaws were banned so no man would have to pull another around like a beast of burden. Like other former beggars and rickshaw pullers, our host had become a factory worker until he retired.

His pride in his life under the new society was unmistakable. "Revolution and socialism," he told us, "have wiped out the three fears of unemployment, old age and illness."

CROWDED BUT CHEAP

The apartment was clean and full of well crafted hardwood furniture. On shelves were pictures of Chairman Mao and Chou En-lai, a radio and, still uncommon in Chinese households, a television set. His wife was cooking a tantalizing smelling dinner in the kitchen area as we talked.

Besides him, the apartment is home for his wife, two sons - a translator who is often away and a factory worker - the wife of one of them and their two young children.

With all three generations in three rooms, it was a little crowded by our standards.

The rent on the other hand had just been lowered from 7.2 to 5.8 yuan a month. That works out to under \$3.50 monthly. The total income of his family in salaries and pensions is 300 yuan a month. With necessities so cheap, they bank a third of their income every month!

Outside, one member of our tour commented, "This is a housing project? Back home a project means a dead end. Survival. Look here - it's clean with grass and trees and people are all over outside enjoying themselves." Furthermore, there was no landlord - the project was run by an elected committee of residents, mainly non-working mothers and retirees.

We met with several women leaders of this committee, who like many leaders of mass organizations in China, are members of the Communist Party.

We were told there were 35 other such projects in Shanghai, most of them larger than the one we saw. Everywhere we saw more under construction. This still can house only a portion of the city's millions. The others live mostly in older two and three story walkups, which don't look as 'Chinese' as buildings in the other cities we saw.

(Shanghai was long controlled by Westerners and in many ways was more familiar to us than other Chinese cities.)

Blocks and neighborhoods are organized the same way the projects are.

A CITY TRANSFORMED

One of the most striking things about Shanghai, and China in general, was that we didn't see any rich people or any really poor people. The society as a whole is still very much marked by its impoverished past but everybody works and nobody lives high off the labor of others.

Shanghai before 1949 was a real cesspool where anything was available - for a price - and criminal gangs openly helped run the city. We saw no beggars, no hookers, no opium dens.

What's more, nobody's windows have grates or bars on them and people stroll alone or in couples through the parks at all hours of night and nobody seems at all worried. What few police we saw, mostly directing traffic, did not carry guns.

DAILY ROUTINE

Because we were only in China for a few weeks, we couldn't get a really deep picture of how people live, but we learned a lot from the glimpses we did get.

Every morning, thousands of early risers do a series of traditional Chinese limbering exercises out in the streets. Some retired workers do them later in the morning.

People head to their jobs, which are mostly near where they live, by foot, bus and especially by bicycle. Almost no-one has cars, but once or twice we saw actual bicycle jams during the rush hour. Nevertheless, people stayed amazingly patient and even-tempered throughout.

Many workplaces and most neighborhoods have day-care centers for infants and toddlers. Older children go to school and many spend their after school hours at remarkable places called children's palaces. Here kids can pursue dozens of interests from art and acting, to sports, to scientific experiments to learning foreign languages.

Most neighborhoods, like the project we visited, have a bunch of small stores - bakeries, leather shops, photographic studios with wedding pictures in the windows, liquor stores, and so on.

We ourselves went on a shopping binge through a giant department store in downtown Shanghai. It was pretty impressive. All nine floors were crowded with people buying everything from tools to toothbrushes. We were surprised to see large and shopper-filled sections for things like electronic parts, art supplies and sporting goods.

Since there are no capitalists taking a profit, we were told, the government is free to sell clothing and other necessities at low prices. But as part of the national economic plans drawn up by the state under the leadership of the Communist Party, luxuries like TVs are kept relatively expensive. This way the government is able to accumulate money to bankroll economic growth and help pay the costs of running society.

After work, people cook at home or take home prepared meals from a small stand.

AFTER WORK

In the evenings we saw many people

playing cards in front of their houses or watching televisions set up with chairs on the streets. Many folks study politics, a foreign language or other subjects either in free study classes or from radio courses. Younger workers also play a lot of basketball and other sports in the evenings and on the weekends. Young couples stroll hand in hand through the parks.

Night out-type entertainment is also available. We easily saw a dozen movie theatres, one showing an old British flick with subtitles. We attended an astounding acrobatic performance which goes on every night for a few pennies.

But it's not American style night life. Except in tourist hotels there are no bars or nightclubs, only restaurants. Despite this, Shanghai never rolls up its sidewalks. Some shops and public transportation are always open as the graveyard shift goes about its business.

We even got a look at what the future holds for the Chinese people at the Ching San Petrochemical works. This complex lies 45 miles south of Shanghai and churns out 200,000 miles of synthetic fiber every year. It was built over the last few years on land reclaimed from the sea so that valuable farmland wouldn't be destroyed.

This is a centrally planned alternative to expanding Shanghai, already one of the five largest cities in the world. Along with the plant a whole spanking new town has sprung up. Big enough for 42,000 people, it has wide streets laid out for motor traffic. White apartment buildings ten or twelve stories high with porches line the streets. And a real eye opener for anyone who has ever driven across North Jersey, although the plant is right next door, the pollution controls are so tight you can't tell by sense of smell.

(In the February Workers Voice, we will take a look at what it's like to work in the People's Republic.)

