

CHINA EPIDERMIS

*A search for planet sense
in the Chinese Revolution*

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Douglas and Marie had just returned from seven weeks in China when the following conversations were recorded in November 1973. The interview was conducted by Douglas' son, Jerry. Their first-hand report, like others, indicates that China, in a movement deepened by the Cultural Revolution, has advanced beyond all historical models of socialism. The problem remains, however, of assessing the impact of socialist systems on the biosphere. When ecological criteria are applied, conventional socialist models share a single line of progression and philosophy with capitalist systems: both display a commitment to unlimited growth and savage exploitation of the biosphere in service of a "world view," a view marked by species conceit and grotesque anthropocentric exaggerations, often further refined into nationalism and cultural/economic imperialism. The fundamental problem is that historically this "world view" notion of social evolution, or anthropocentric succession, reverses the stages of natural succession, producing cumulative ecological degradation in the process. The state, perhaps civilization itself, is inimical to the planet.

China, as an example of a consciously evolving society engaged in transformation, is at the threshold. Her program of development thus far reveals a wise commitment to the maximum conservation of materials and energy, decentralized self-sufficiency, urban-rural mix, ethnic diversity, recycling of wastes, low-impact technology, reflexive information flow, and a goal of stable population. It is an important question whether this internal program of conscious adaptation to the natural goals of stability and symbiosis can withstand China's emergence as a "world" power – that tangled realm of growth, domination, spheres of influence, monopoly – and whether the decentralized "back and forth" flow of information that seems to characterize her internal policy-making can be sustained in international affairs. But aside from this question, which is contextual, we confined ourselves to exploring the relations of China's social system to environmental systems, and pursuing the integrative adaptations that have had the effect of lessening impact on 3½ million square miles of the planet by 750 million of its human inhabitants.

Illustrations by Douglas Gorsline

Jerry: What is the over-all attitude in China with respect to the problem of pollution?

Marie: In a factory in Shanghai a cadre told us the following: we should follow Mao Tse Tung thinking and start every proceeding in the interest of the people. A socialist factory should serve the people, not harm the people, so we must make comprehensive use of the three wastes: solids, liquids, and gasses. In appearance these three appear to be waste but, if treated correctly, they can be made useful. To proceed correctly, we should turn the harmful into what is beneficial and what is waste to treasure. We should rely on the masses and use everybody's participation. In order to correct the problem one must pool the collective wisdom. These are the general principles of work in China.

Douglas: That collective wisdom of the masses — you have to practically pull them apart to find out who in the masses had that wisdom, in a given situation, which then becomes collectivized through discussion.

Marie: You see, it becomes collective by the people collectively having an interest and recognizing the problem. In this particular case, two men came up with the solution but the question had come from many. That's why they didn't like us asking: who provided the solution? because by asking it you forget that it took the right question in order to provide the solution.

Douglas: In this situation the problem resulted from a discharge resembling carbon . . .

Jerry: A particular discharge?

Douglas: Yes. They showed us some which was piled up. It was like dust. Fine carbon. We finally elicited the fact that two men, out of the collective questioning, began to inquire. They felt something could be done with it. Then the suggestion was made to make a kind of pipe from it that was not a conductor of electricity, or subject to the effects of acid. Now they're manufacturing a pipe out of the waste.

Marie: They said that as a result of the three Mao directives they're now putting out 72,000 tons of their product, which is caustic soda, while in 1949 — pre-liberation — they produced 700 tons. Each three days they're putting out the total annual output of 1949.

Jerry: So they've increased their output tremendously even while eliminating sources of pollution?

Marie: Yes, and their variety has increased tremendously from just three products pre-liberation to some 20 products today. As they developed they also worked on the waste problem so that they are using the waste gas, water, and solid residue, and this becomes a significant part of the productive increase.

Douglas: They're concerned about efficient production and effective production but not financial profit.

Marie: They're constantly mentioning that factories are not run for profit but to serve the people. Everything is done for the people. They don't worry about the profit motive. They mentioned the same thing with regard to gases and the problem of atmospheric pollution — following the same policy of deriving raw materials from "waste." They call this an active — as opposed to passive — policy. A passive policy to them is one where you put another chemical in to counteract the waste problem but don't attack the problem comprehensively; not making *good use* out of waste.

Jerry: You mentioned a plan for relocating factories — where?

Douglas: Well, their plan is that factories that were located in the cities before liberation will gradually be moved outside the city and into communes where productive labor will be available and where the factory direction will be responsible to the people.

Marie: Yes. In Shanghai, for instance, they've already moved eight industries out including their automotive, electric and most of their chemical; next they want to move heavy machinery industry out. Things they can move out they will and each time that they build a new plant, the pollution problem must be proved to have been dealt with in the *planning* stage.

Jerry: And the factory then becomes part of the productive capacity of the commune.

Douglas: Yes. Incidentally, to go back to the pollution question, they stated to me that of the two factors – pollution and production – the *pollution* problem has to be tackled first, because it effects more people than production does.

Jerry: Going to the root.

Douglas: They said repeatedly: out of the contradiction comes unity. At the same factory I noticed decorative gardens surrounding the plant and asked about them and they answered that they were there for surveillance of the atmosphere; to observe any effects on the plants.

Jerry: Biological monitoring, like taking the canary in the mine to test for methane.

Marie: Another example of an active solution: the factory was using 150 tons of coal per day and emitting black smoke. They contrived a way to hold back 90% of the soot – that's four tons a day, a truckload – and produce a coal paste from it. In Shanghai we saw people using little round bricks made from this paste for cooking-fuel. It's the cheapest material they can use to cook with.

Douglas: They use about two a day. They're circular – like a shell casing – with holes for ventilation. The stove base is constructed so they just fit.

Jerry: Fantastic – what would the cost be?

Douglas: Obviously very cheap, but I don't know how much. The interesting point to note here is that the pricing mechanism in China is adjusted to the overall ability to buy.

Jerry: Adjusted to need?

Marie: And wouldn't increase with demand. The price would always remain related to production cost. It has nothing to do with the market.

Jerry: Is regional self-sufficiency pursued as national policy?

Douglas: Yes. It's a fundamental and basic policy of Chinese society to at all times insist upon self-sufficiency, meaning a given area will provide the bulk of its own food and essential requirements and even its own machinery in some cases. In any discussion of China the subject of self-sufficiency is primary. The province of Kwangtung, for example, provides completely for the feeding of its own population and, in addition, has enough left over to send all the rice that Cuba buys from China. In a conversation we had with Rewi Alley, he said the most

important mistake Cuba made was in not realizing that self-sufficiency and self-reliance is a primary necessity for independent survival.

Marie: And they have other crops, too. They have two crops of rice, and one of wheat on the same land; then they have one of sugar cane, and the other necessary crops; and they also have fish-ponds — a kind of do-it-yourself aquaculture.

Jerry: How is Kwangtung organized toward self-sufficiency?

Douglas: Kwangtung is an immense province — about 45 million people covering 84,000 square miles — and is organized according to counties, communes, brigades, work production teams, in descending order.

Jerry: Is it decentralized? Would the county make decisions concerning the region as a whole, leaving the lower units considerable autonomy?

Douglas: Yes.

Marie: Well, there is a total back and forth...you go from work-production team to the commune and back and forth. Then from there they work with the county and the county goes back and forth with the next level and so on up to the central government. The government initiates policy too, but it must always be responsive to the masses because of this back-and-forth pattern.

Jerry: So you have a mixture of the centralized and de-centralized, organized by levels of complexity, with representation all along the line.

Marie: Yes. Back and forth, up and down. And, in one situation, they pointed out another distinction, between teaching and learning. They said it was not a matter of teaching, but that each learns from each other. One presents what one has and others learn from it as they choose to. Their orientation is to really consider the other's point of view.

Jerry: Let me take another angle on the pollution problem: here in the West the greatest problem is that pollution is not assessed as a cost at all. It's an "external," outside the cost/benefit analysis. This is a failure in social-accounting. What's the situation in China in these terms and how is capital allocated for solutions?

Marie: They feel the health of the people is primary and necessitates the expenditure, but remember, they strive for transformation of waste into treasure.

Douglas: For example, what ultimately resulted in the production of the heating bricks, and at the same time eradicated the pollution. They

transformed a social "cost" into a social "benefit." Incidentally, in terms of self-sufficiency: they had one design for solving the problem of the waste which would have cost the 50,000 yuan and stopped production for two years. They worked out this solution, which cost only 6,000 yuan and two weeks to install, resulting in the heating bricks.

Marie: One of the people involved in the production committee said: "In some transformation there is no income, the point is for health. In others there is. In any case, the state will supply funds when it is a matter of public health.

Jerry: Was this the same interview? Tell us something about the factory and the people you talked to.

Marie: The interview took place in Shanghai in a chemical factory founded in 1929 and still within city limits. It is going through the process of transformation and will eventually be relocated. We talked mainly with two young men. One, a cadre in the trade union, was 29. The other, a representative from the revolutionary committee of chemical works, was 36.

Jerry: So the workers were represented in this interview?

Marie: Yes. Representation is done through a three-in-one . . . in this case workers, the revolutionary committee, and technical cadres. We were told in Peking that national policy is worked out at the local level. In other words, it comes from below and then goes to the highest levels and then back down. Policy is evaluated by the central committee and propagated throughout the country.

Jerry: The fact that industry is being located outside the cities would seem to indicate an end to large, urban-industrial complexes.

Douglas: Yes. They're seeking an equalization between urban and rural populations. Balanced, and in self-sufficient units.

Marie: There aren't that many industrial cities in China to begin with.

Douglas: And the urban areas are being de-industrialized and de-populated to a degree. In France the youth migrate to the city. In China it's reversed, with the youth migrating to the country.

Marie: They send the educated youth who have gone through the equivalent of junior high, to spend three years in the country before they decide what to do. Many of them choose to stay. Some return to learn a trade and then go back. It's national policy to settle the countryside.



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Douglas: "Go down to the countryside" . . . there is as much "psychic" interest in going to the country as there is to remain in the city. It's equalized.

Jerry: In the U.S. the most advanced thinking in most cases is in terms of conservation. From our conversations earlier I have the impression China is concerned with something larger, more like reclamation, enlargement . . . could you comment on that?

Douglas: Once again, the concern is for "transformation." For example they're planting trees everywhere, alongside streets, bordering roads, throughout the fields.

Jerry: Because they recognize the role trees play in regulating the atmosphere, retaining soil, and so forth?

Douglas: Peking talks of having changed its climate with trees.

Marie: Outside the cities they use reforestation for water retention, protecting watersheds.

Douglas: And along country roads, within the trees, are line upon line of willows which are used to make baskets. The plains have been planted with wind-breaks. In a work brigade area along the ditches, along the roads, there is continual planting.

Marie: I went to a tree nursery in Shanghai which was one of three which together provide 600-800 thousand trees. The one I went to provided 200-250 thousand trees to Shanghai and new communes, and was seventy hectares, of which 80% was planted with trees. In the cities there are work teams that are totally devoted to taking care of trees, planting and maintaining. There are 400 people on that team. Under the Forest Management Bureau they have 5,000 people for the Shanghai region, caring for trees and flowers . . . when I was in Inner Mongolia, before we went out to the grasslands, we were shown a movie about a commune called Daching. What they did was to try to turn desert land into arable land. The desert has been primarily an animal husbandry area for migrant troops of sheep and goats. They first tried to maintain the grass cover by dividing winter and summer ranges. After that they realized that if they were going to become more settled communities, which is the national policy, they should try to transform the desert to have arable crop land and water. A woman who led one production brigade decided they could reclaim the land by planting shrubs. So, they went out — the whole brigade — with picks and seedlings, enormous bundles, and planted an enormous number of shrubs. At the end of the year, unfortunately, only a fraction had survived. They

decided they had done it the wrong way, so they started all over. This time planting more methodically, taking into account wind and slope and so on, and when they got the shrubs installed they planted trees, in the next season. Finally, they did indeed create an area that can be planted, where they have water — they now have water even for laundry.

Jerry: You mean they restored a watershed?

Marie: Yes, a watershed and arable land.

Jerry: Were these herding nomadic people converted to agriculture?

Marie: I can't say for these people — it was a movie — but while we were actually in Inner Mongolia we talked to people and they did welcome it. It was shown how they could better survive. They were starving. And then there were the incentives of education and health care.

Jerry: So it's not something that's imposed.

Marie: No, no — never imposed. Nothing, really, is ever imposed. In medicine, even, operations are not imposed. Everything is explained to you and if you learn a measure is proper for you to do, then you do it. If you don't learn, then you don't have to have that policy imposed on you. Your obligation is to listen and consider. The pressure is from your peer group. The decision is yours.

Jerry: There is an image prevalent in North America of China as an undifferentiated mass, millions of uniformed Chinese displaying the Red Book. In our conversations you convey a very different image, of regional diversity, cultural autonomy, a federation of national minorities . . . could you comment?

Douglas: Well, the idea of the "blue ants," which was a favorite recently, is certainly not true. On the streets of the cities, for example, the movement of people on bicycle and foot is quite spontaneous and independent of the horns of the trucks, buses, and few official cars. At the harvest, work teams display great individuality — working according to their own plans, following their own procedures. The way they each winnowed the grain — throwing it up into the air so that the wind would blow off the chaff — each with his or her own style, completely individual in pace and manner.

Jerry: What is the policy towards national minorities?



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Marie: Chairman Mao felt, long before liberation, that the national minorities would have to be given their autonomy in many ways, to have their language and a sense of their history, a continuing sense of their culture, the right to live their own lives according to former ways. Though introduced to new and more healthy ways of life to raise their children into. Schools serving minorities are bi-lingual. At the same time, at the university level, they are cataloging their customs and language — they are editing the first Mongolian/Han dictionary — so they have their own language and culture but they are able to integrate by having the Han language.

Jerry: So China is a culture-complex, differentiated but cohesive?

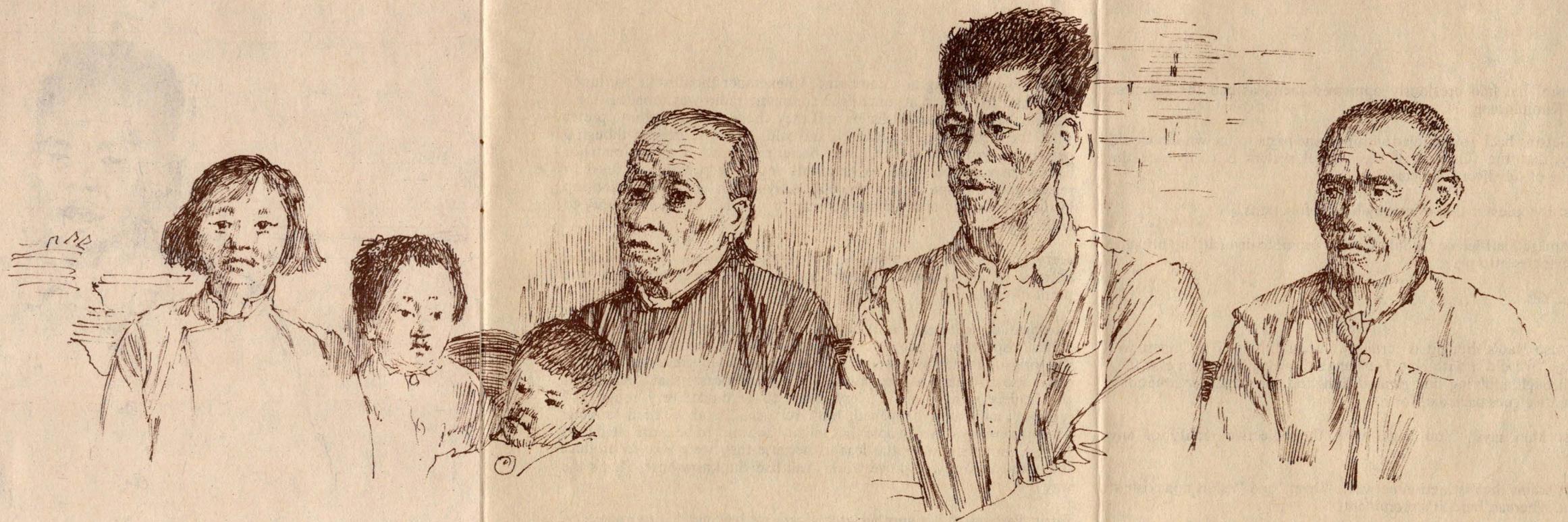
Marie: Yes, very much so. And there is considerable integration. On every level of political authority, through the highest, they participate, even though less educated in the Han way. Minority representatives make an enormous effort to be so educated that they can contribute not only to their own culture but also to the national culture/economic system. Meanwhile, through what is admittedly propaganda — but also genuine information — they have learned about other possibilities and then make choices, say to live a settled life having been Mongolian nomads. There they still have their yurts in open grasslands and love them but they have the option, in winter, of living in communes where the children can go to an advanced school. But in good weather they're out in the plains. They have primary schools and medical care out there too. It's suggested to them that it is better for their children and their general livelihood to do the other in the winter. But they can do whichever they want. And it's the same with the boat-people in the south.

Jerry: Their original culture was probably a very stable system.

Douglas: Yes, originally, but it was so destroyed . . .

Marie: Yes, destroyed by the Japanese invaders, by invaders for centuries . . .

Douglas: Including the Han. One of Chairman Mao's most important admonitions is to beware of "Han chauvinism" because it was Han



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chauvinism that had previously oppressed them, as had the Japanese and the Kuomintang.

Jerry: Getting back to the relationship of the parts to the whole: would you say that the function of the central system is to oversee the coherence of the diversified parts?

Douglas: I would say that is exactly how it functions.

Jerry: And self sufficiency would tend to promote diversity by bringing local capacities into play?

Douglas: Yes.

Marie: Also Mao's thought is certainly a central thing. The Chinese will often say "We did it with Mao Tse-Tung's thought," in which case they did it through applying that *general* thing to their *particular* situations. The initiative goes back and forth.

Douglas: Mao says "You begin with the objective reality of any situation."

Jerry: It seems the distinction between "them" and "us" is nonexistent in China. Whereas, here, it's prominent.

Douglas: No, there is no such distinction in China.

Jerry: Well how does it operate with that many people? What's the population in China now?

Marie: Approximately 750 million.

Jerry: How do you create an intimate, bonding network among that many people?

Douglas: Because of what we keep referring to as the "back and forth," or "up-and-down" relationships. From every little area to every large area. Everyone who is delegated to represent the people is delegated *by the people* and subject to their control — at any point is subject to recall by the people. That's not just a statement, as in the U.S. — it's the actual situation! Those who go to universities, those who go into the army, and those who are delegated to represent the people — all have to be passed, suggested by, their peers at the *lowest* level. Once,

when I was painting in a commune, I remember they broke for lunch and while they were at lunch, the commune radio was broadcasting a lecture that people could listen to if they chose. I asked the interpreter what the lecture was. He laughed and said: "They're saying: though a person can write and speak Chinese better than most, he or she may not be the person you want to represent you. The person you need to represent you is the person who politically understands his relationship in the community and the relationship of people in the community to each other."

Jerry: That's very interesting — very interesting, too, that they select literacy as an example because that often produces a very private point-of-view.

Douglas: By contrast, in America, the man who presents a certain "class" aspect, or image, is often the man that is rewarded by position. The brigade leaders we encountered in China often presented the least conventional image of "responsibility." In two cases that I remember the leaders were . . . ah . . . very down to hard-pan; very rough and ready . . . and, as it happened, both very small and wizened looking. There are many other people that might "appear" to be more eligible as leaders, but they were the leaders because they were able to produce the enthusiasm of collective work. And had the know-how. That's the way it is.

Jerry: Perhaps this is another area where we have tended to impose on the Chinese situation a kind of false dichotomy — that these are two essential parts of a single process; that there always has to be an overall regulation of the whole, but it never tends to become predominant, or totalitarian, nor does the central government "whither away," but the exchange has to be constantly balanced?

Douglas: There is another side which we must never forget: Chairman Mao said that the cultural revolution was merely one of many to come because there is always the threat of elitism and there must always be a renewed cultural revolution.

Jerry: Mao says that? That the vision has always to be refreshed and renewed with continuing struggle?

Douglas: Yes, he says that. That those who are in power inevitably tend towards an elitist situation and it has to be broken up every time it forms — constantly checked. It's openly admitted, openly said, openly recognized as a recurrent necessity — to *check-mate elitism*.

Vice chairman Red Commune
Shuang Cuiào People's Commune

Chuang Ho Shan



Pekin Black Pigs a - Chuang Ho Shan Black Pig Chuang Ho Shan (Black)
b - Pi Jia's Boston Pekin variety