

We Know Nothing About China

By Donato (Danny) Pietrodangelo

For those of us raised in the 1950s, '60s and '70s, China had always been, first, a mystical abstraction: Confucian temples, incense, chanting monks and big-bellied Buddhas. And, second, a confluence of stereotypes: Charlie Chan, Kung Fu masters, pasty-faced women with big hair and small feet, suicidal infantry in the snows of Korea, Mao and a sea of red book-waving followers bent on nuclear Armageddon, tanks in Tiananmen Square, lead-laden toys and the people who make nearly everything sold at Wal-Mart.

I've been as guilty as anyone.

Which makes you wonder, over the years, have the Chinese seen us as an amalgamation of Southern Baptist revivals, Jerry Lewis, Ali versus Foreman, Britney, Gettysburg, the Silent Majority, Kent State and the people who will buy just about anything at Wal-Mart?

Will that all change with the Olympics? No doubt, some. But let's keep in mind that, aside from the games, Olympic festivities are an extravagantly staged halftime show; a spectacular break, an entertaining diversion from what went on before the show and what happens after it ends. And, as with any performance, what you see or don't see is up to the sponsors.

Just back from nearly three weeks in rural China, I realize that what we don't know — beyond smogged-in Beijing — about a place several millennia old, home to one out of every five earthlings and the emerging epicenter of the planet's economy, is embarrassing and more than a little dangerous.

We traveled by plane, boat, train, minivan and oxcart through the Southwest provinces of Guangxi and Yunnan, which are predominantly rural, relatively poor and more than 1,200 miles from the Olympic frenzy.

The 13th-century Mongol invasion, Genghis and Kublai Khan, Marco Polo, the silk trade, the horrors at the hands of Mao's Red Guard, the brutality of the Japanese occupation, and the heroics of U.S. pilots of the Flying Tigers squadron are all colorful threads in the tapestry of this region's past.





In these provinces, we were able to experience two very different sides of China: the velocity of tumultuous mega cities such as Kunming (population 7.5 million) and the country's remote, rural roots -- villages and hamlets, tucked into tropical forested valleys, cloud shrouded mountains or overlooking miles of terraced, rice fields. Frequently, we were the only Westerners in town.

Most importantly, we caught a glimpse into the impending collision of history, culture, class and economics threatening China. Through a small window, we witnessed the odd and ironic convergence of East and West, and the uneasy balance of creeping capitalism under Communist governance.

China has gone from zero to 60 faster than a Lamborghini.

Take development. As you enter even medium -size cities, the view is mind-boggling. Under construction superstructures in clusters of three, four or five piercing the skies. These aren't affordable housing for farmers turned factory workers. They're 20- to 30 -story condos, office buildings, five -star hotels and apartments, compliments of foreign investment — \$70 billion last year — and ready for the investors and their entourages already arriving. Some of the units are expected to rent for \$2,000 per month. That's about six months' take-home pay for a Chinese middle manager, or half the price of a new car.

But there doesn't appear to be a master plan for this spiraling urban expansion: A 12th -century temple sits in the shadow of a new skyscraper; the view from a luxury hotel's 15th floor is laundry drying on the roof of crumbling, concrete -block apartments.

An interesting and ironic convergence of China's old and new: scaffolding surrounding the multi-story construction projects is made – not from steel – but from large, lashed bamboo poles.

Newfound prosperity over the past 10 years has spawned a unprecedented middle class. Earning as much as \$10,000 per year, as opposed to the average per -capita income of about \$2,000 a year, they have disposable income, a healthy habit for consumer goods and an anxious need to keep up with their neighbors.

The result is disorienting — the best and worst of the West in Chinese.

Backpack -carrying teens in acid jeans and T-shirts shop for stylish shoes, fashionable clothes, jewelry and rhinestone -covered cell phones. Girls giggle and gossip over lunch – bowls of noodles -- not burgers, while boys check them out; young moms survey what's available in kids wear, while young families ponder which model washing machine to buy.

Like Saturday in any mall in America. Between open front stores, there are stalls enjoying brisk business, selling pork shish kabobs, fried chicken feet and baskets of exotic fruits and vegetables. Old, blind women tell fortunes on the sidewalk, while behind them, hungry shoppers can choose from bowls of rice or noodles, small fish-on-a-stick and lots of things I didn't recognize. A few blocks over, an amused and friendly salesman invites us to sample his fare — a table spread with ready-to-eat pig snouts, duck heads, snakes and lizards.

At night, the action continues in garish pall of an endless row of neon signs.

A piece of China few Olympic visitors will see is the rural countryside. While I hate cliches, breathtaking doesn't do it justice.

Take the Li River. It winds through towering, forested, limestone mountains that the Chinese liken to dragon's teeth. Rising from the river's edge — sometimes reaching up through a soft halo of clouds — these towering, cylindrical formations are extraordinary wonders of nature. Stretching far into the horizon, no two peaks are the same.

Farther west, the rural center of Yunnan province is a region frozen in time. In a village called Yuanyang, the women are known for their intricately embroidered, vests, wraps, tunics and hats. The stitch work is intertwined in rainbows of color. These are everyday outfits worn by young girls walking unabashedly with friends dressed T's and jeans. Merchandising has made its inroads here as well. Shops with stylish clothes and sportswear sharing ancient cobblestone roads with butcher stalls and food vendors.

Again, breathtaking is insufficient to describe the rice fields of Yuanyang. Terraces are carved into the slopes of hills, creating cascading rows of brilliant green ribbons. The terraces themselves are subdivided -- with low rock walls and small patches of other crops -- which create curved parcels of growing rice, individually laid out to fit the unique shape of a particular terrace. The stepping stone-like ridges, are tended as they have been for centuries -- by hand, with cycles and water buffalo drawn plows.

Viewed from above, there's peaceful symmetry to the scene, a design that seems uniquely Chinese, in which farmers shape their crops to the land, rather than the land to their crops.

Sad to say, it's a way of life that's quickly vanishing — and the loss poses multiple problems for the Chinese government.

While Mao envisioned a classless society, capitalism doesn't. Rural regions enjoy very little of China's new prosperity. While urbanites earn an average \$2,500 per year, rural residents make less than half that, and six out of 10 make less than \$600 per year. These oppressively low wages cover little more than subsistence. For instance, more than nine out of 10 urbanites own both refrigerators and washing machines; in rural areas its three out of 10.

The disparity is causing discontent — sometimes violent — and an exodus from farms to the city with hope for a factory job and dreams of better life.

According to the government, every year, about 12 million farmers or their off-spring move to the city. With 9 million city dwellers currently without jobs, and the unemployment rate at 10

percent and climbing, there are more and more shattered dreams. Another problem for China is that, according to some estimates, dwindling farm life meant rice production was lower in 2005 than it was in the year 2000. Since then, the decrease may have accelerated.

One of the most rewarding aspects of this eye-opening journey was the people of China. Everywhere we went, without exception, people were gracious, friendly, inviting and frequently curious. Kids looked at us in wonder, as if we were extra terrestrials; moms smiled proudly and encouraged us to take pictures of their beautiful babies. We helped college students practice their English on the train, and new friends helped me hail a village taxi — OK, an oxcart — after making me join them in way too many toasts with very potent Chinese rice wine.

As the self -appointed local U.S. Ambassador of goodwill from Tallahassee, how could I refuse?

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