

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

CHINA REVISITED

An Ancient Country Moves into the Modern Age

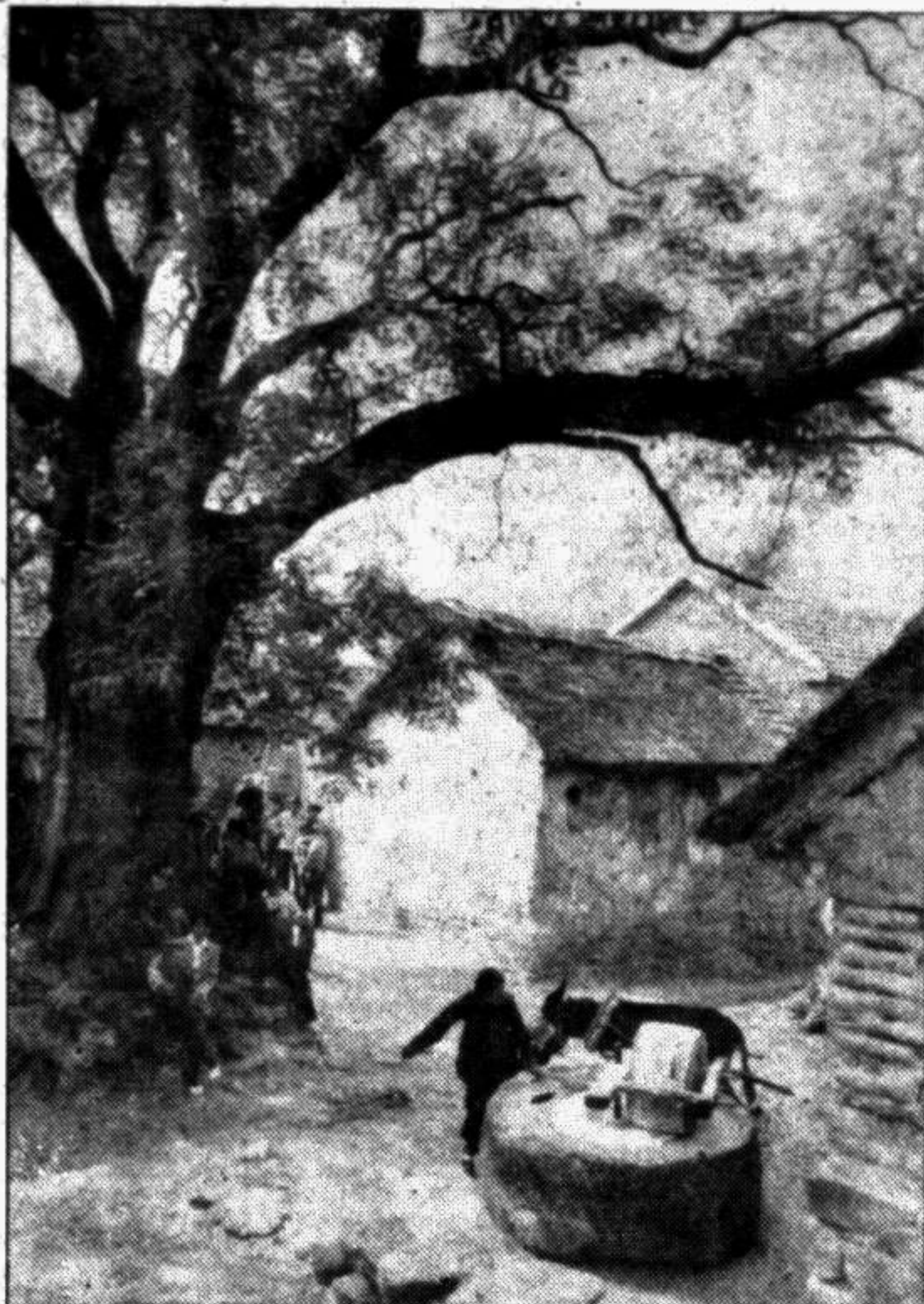
D P Barua, the Chief Editor and Managing Director of BSS, sums up impressions of his recent tour.

I flew into Beijing on a pleasant cool September morning after a three-hour flight from Hong Kong. I was visiting People's Republic of China as the Chief Editor and Managing Director of the Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha from September 5 to 15 at the invitation of Xinhua News Agency, primarily for exchange of views to strengthen cooperation between BSS and Xinhua and also to familiarise myself with the current developments in China. Our two Agencies signed Cooperation agreement in 1978.

I was eagerly looking forward to the visit to witness the vast changes, including many historic and cataclysmic developments, that have occurred in China since I had first visited this great country for three weeks about 30 years ago in 1963. I passed through Beijing on transit in 1990 on my way to Ulan Bator and had a two-day stop-over but time was too brief to look around and see the developments in the wake of sweeping modernisation and reforms.

My meeting with the Vice President of Xinhua News Agency, Mr Pang Bangqian (who enjoys the rank of a Vice Minister), at a dinner he hosted to welcome me on September 5 evening, gave me opportunity for wide exchange of views on many-sided cordial relationship between China and Bangladesh and the role of our two News Agencies to strengthen the relations through mutual exchange of news. The Charge d' Affaires of Bangladesh Embassy in Beijing, Mr Abu Nasser Wahid, who was at the dinner (the Ambassador was then in Bangladesh) joined us now and then during our discussions.

Xinhua — meaning New China — was born in 1931 as a news agency in Ruijin, grew up in Yanan caves and was later based in Taihang mountains during the protracted Chinese revolutionary struggle steered by the Chinese Communist Party under the leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong. The Agency, since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, grew gradually as a strong voice of China. The Xinhua Vice President spoke of future plans of the Agency saying that it is endeavouring to emerge as probably the world's biggest news agency with the largest news service. It will soon introduce dish antennae technology replacing the exist-



An ancient scholar tree and grindstone symbolising the old village.

news flow of our nation to disseminate both international and national news to our media and also project Bangladesh internationally. In Xinhua Vice President welcomed my idea of transmitting some BSS news to Xinhua from our national perspective for the Chinese media.

After the dinner I was taken round the Asia-Pacific Desk of the International Department where I saw journalists working with computers in various foreign languages. Xinhua has hired on its staff some senior foreign journalists to brush foreign-language news copies into professionally good stories. I met a senior journalist

educated elite. Incentives are given to more efficient workers while social security — in the form of urban flats, medical benefit and free schooling — is ensured for all citizens.

In China of today, there is no restriction for private property ownership. Any citizen has the right to own a house and transport if he can afford it, though practically very few people have such private property in urban areas. Job opportunities with higher salary in foreign companies are learnt to be attracting educated young Chinese, particularly those with knowledge in foreign languages.

Visiting some multi-storied state-owned big departmental stores in Beijing, I found them heavily crowded with people engaged in brisk buying. Most shops and business establishments are state-owned. But there are free open markets too with individual citizens selling mostly vegetables and fruit or running small eating houses. A familiar scene is that of most Chinese riding bicycles in separate lanes earmarked on both sides of city streets while automobiles including sleek foreign cars are numerous in the wide streets and boulevards of Beijing.

A large number of high-rise hotels have been built adding colour to the skyline during the last 10 years since modernisation. Beijing has 10 five-star hotels, some with foreign investments, and in one of these new Beijing hotels where I was staying, I came across many foreigners including overseas Chinese, obviously investors using business facilities in the communication centre. Hotel rooms are provided with TV sets with access to foreign channels like CNN,

from Australia Mervyn Cull who has been living in Beijing for several years to work for Xinhua.

During the three days in Beijing, there were usual sightseeing trips to the Great Wall, Ming Tombs, Summer Palace, Temple of Heaven, etc, but going round the city after nearly 30 years since my first visit in 1963, I was vastly impressed to see the many facets of



Waist-drum dance in Yan'an, Shaanxi Province.

Beijing's changing skyline. Wherever we drove down, there were high-rise residential buildings. I was told that nearly 70 per cent of more than 10 million population of Beijing city are provided with housing accommodation on payment of rather nominal rent for the flats allotted according to the size of the family.

Most Chinese are employed in state-owned enterprises and organisations which provide rational pay structure. Employment in factories fetches higher wages for workers than those for white-collar jobs for

BBC, Star and NHK. And I enjoyed having witnessed mostly CNN programmes till late night on current global affairs including American Presidential election campaigns. One night it was interesting to have watched an intellectually stimulating discussion in the CNN on Chinese dilemma during a book review programme on 'China's Future' by an American author. During a visit to the Temple of Heaven on the morning of September 8, a Sunday, I saw many couples, mostly young, dancing joyfully hand in hand in the open-air garden. There is a fresh breeze

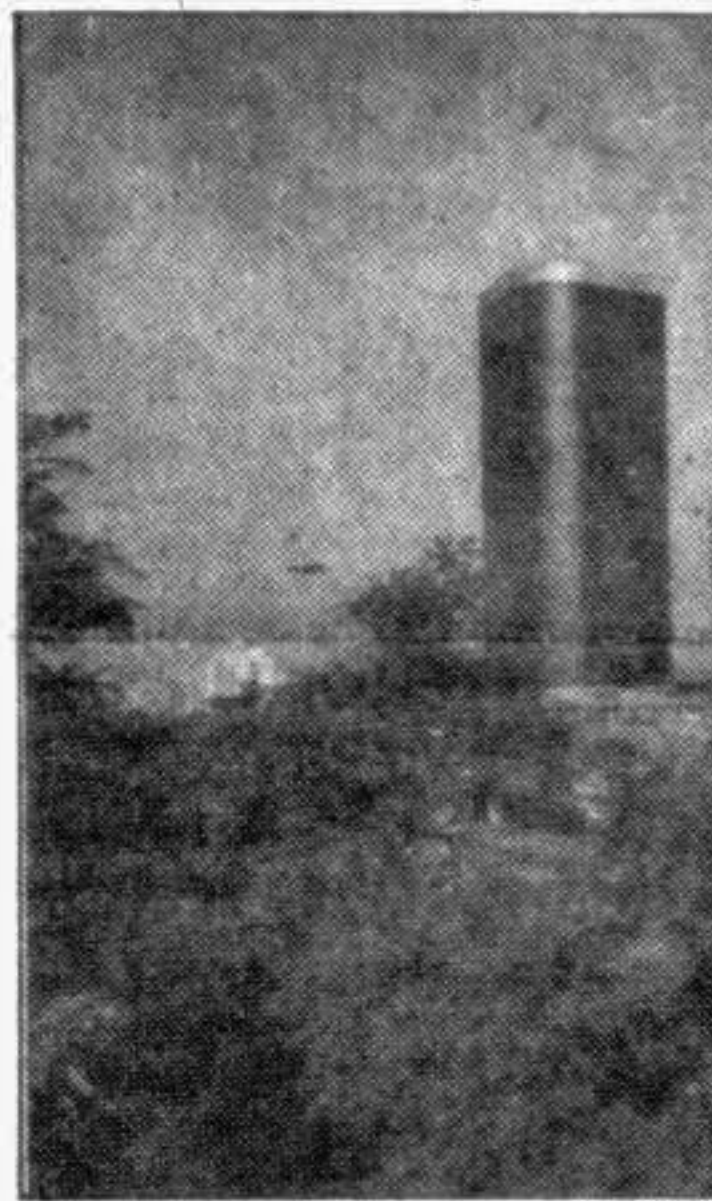
of relaxed atmosphere in the present-day China. During my visit to Mausoleum of Chairman Mao, I had to queue up in the very long line of visitors and I learnt from the keeper of the gate that nearly 50,000 people on average, mostly from provinces, daily visit it to pay regards to the leaders of Chinese revolution and founder of People's Republic of China whose body lay embalmed in a Central Hall. Chairman Mao Zedong still enjoys high esteem and one can see his big picture at the Tiananmen square.

The visit to Nanjing, Shanghai and Guangzhou provided me opportunity to witness the fast economic development through foreign investment in joint venture. Though basic sectors of industry and economy are state-owned, joint ventures with shared investment of foreigners and Chinese are considered significant for modernisation and economic progress. Under the new Law, since adoption of open door policy in 1982, China permits foreign enterprises, economic organisations and individual foreigners to invest in China in more than 30 specified sectors in joint venture with the Chinese. Net profit is shared in proportion to investment by both for-

special economic zone like nine other such zones in the country as part of programme for modernisation in fulfilment of what a booklet describes as 'demands of leading comrades including the old generation

revolutionaries.' The Zone, linked with the main city of Shanghai by two bridges and two wide under-water tunnels beneath the river, is divided into four parts: high-tech development area, financial area with banks and financial institutions, industrial area and a free port; 290 projects with foreign investment in joint

ventures and 529 projects from other provinces have already been approved by the Pudong economic Development Authority. A Sino-American joint venture, Shanghai Gillette Company Limited was established in August with a total investment of nearly 62 billion US dollar of which 70 per cent is invested by an American Company. Driving down a large part of



China World Trade Centre, Beijing.

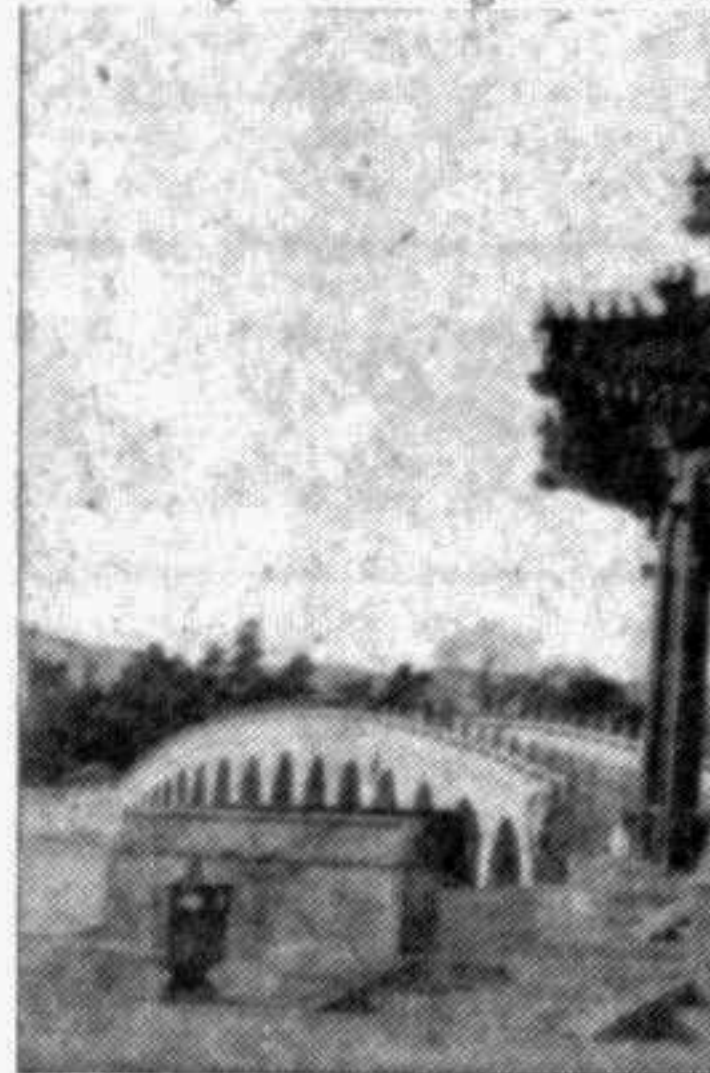
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The posh 36-storeyed Hotel Jinling at Nanjing, was predominantly occupied by foreign businessmen as they could be seen at the lobby, restaurants and revolving 'Sky Palace' bar at the top floor, exchanging views and negotiating business deals with local counterparts. Overseas Chinese constitute a sizeable number of visitors. Talking to a few, I learnt that they find China an attractive and stable country for investment.

Visiting a free open market area known as 'Confucius Temple Market', in Nanjing, I found that many private shops have sprung up. It has a bazaar atmosphere with consumer items being sold amidst hectic bargaining.

I came to know more about the working of joint ventures and rapid economic development during my visit to Shanghai, the largest industrial city of China and one of three biggest cities of the world, with 123 million population. Shanghai presents a panoramic view of skyline with many highrise buildings, mainly new hotels and financial institutions. Parts of the large city exude an old-world atmosphere with heavily-built buildings and narrow roads reminiscent of Western colonial rule. We drove down a nine-kilometer long zigzag bridge over the river Yangpu to visit the eastern side of the city where Pudong Economic Development Zone is being developed. The 350-square-kilometer zone extending upto the sea is equal to the size of Singapore. It is being fast developed into a

whether the cat is black or white. He said the main objective was for China to attain prosperity through joint ventures and modernisation and reach benefits to the people in the vast countryside. The new phenomenon of growth of a very small number of rich people will be appropriately handled by the Government and the Party who, he said, knew the means of narrowing the gap through taxation and other measures at appropriate time. He said, China had to develop, prosper and modernise in order to reach the results to the entire people. That is what he described as 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics.'



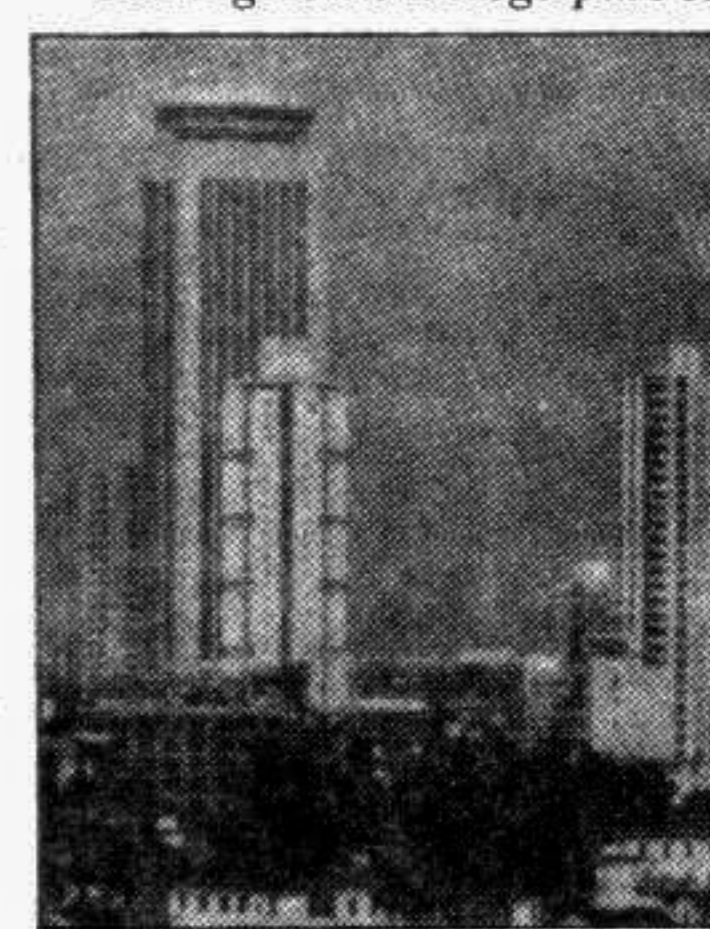
Traditional architecture: Kurou Pavilion, Summer Palace, Beijing.

Giving his impressions, Mr Bert Degraeve, the Belgian General Manager of the Company said that investment climate was excellent in China because of political and social stability. Going round the project, I found installations, of heavy machinery, mostly imported for manufacturing telecommunication equipment.



The skyline of Shenzhen, Special Economic Zone

These observations underline Chinese leaderships close watch on the changing pattern of newly-emerging contradictions in present-day China in the process of fast economic developments following open-door policy. Modernisation has no doubt created a big impact in China's



Shanton, Special Economic Zone

spectacular developments, in industry and economy. Self-sufficient in oil and energy, together with enormous human and material resources, China is poised to make big strides in economic development under the close gaze of the government to achieve the desired goals.

During the visit to a village, about 30 kilometers southwest of Shanghai, I was highly impressed to witness the development of rural areas and the affluence of the farmers. Before I came to this village, I had fleeting glimpse of a cluster of villages with single and double-storeyed buildings amidst-green landscape of fields during my nearly three-and-half hour train journey from Nanjing to Shanghai. Traditional thatched huts have disappeared and Chinese villages now reflect prosperity.

Earlier, I glimpsed the prosperity of the villages on both sides of the 130-kilometer road during my trip to Yangzhou from Nanjing. Land reforms have worked miracles. The old commune system has been dissolved and lands have been distributed to farmers. They are producing paddy, vegetables, mushrooms, fruits and doing fish farming and cat-



Bird's-eye view of Beijing International Airport

tic breeding round the year. After meeting their needs, they sell the surplus to the government and also at the open market and have enough funds to build their private houses and meet other needs. The rural scenario has undergone a basic transformation and I have been told that farmers are rather affluent and enjoy better living standards owning houses and some property than those living in the cities, most of whom live in government flats.

During my visit, accompanied by two Xinhua friends, to this village 'Qizhong', I talked to the Director of the sub-district called 'Maquta Shung'. The Director said that this sub-district has a total area of 70 square kilometres with a population of 30,000. The people in the 20 villages there grown paddy, cotton and fruits in their own lands distributed to them according to the size and working manpower in the family. The farmers have machines for planting and harvesting. They also do fish farming, cattle breeding and mushroom cultivation in their own lands.

The picturesque village 'Qizhong' dotted with mostly double-storeyed buildings looks like a remarkably neat small urban housing estate set on lush green fields. A primary school of the village is housed in a neat specious building. Going round some of the classes it was delightful to be greeted by smiling and cheerful well-attired children from farmers' families. We visited a farmer's house — a two-storeyed building. We knocked at the door and an old lady opened it greeting us. She was the grandmother, aged about 70 living with her grandson and the daughter-in-law. It was time for mid-day meal at around 12-30 p.m. and the women members of the family, having lunch, welcomed us. In the ground floor there are three medium-sized rooms with a bath room fitted with tub. We took off our shoes, climbed the first floor where we saw the grandma's room, the couple's bedroom and a drawing room furnished with sofa sets and TV. The attached bath room had all modern amenities including a bath tub. In the small lawn of the house, a flower garden and a few trees have been raised. The pomegranates were in bloom.

Before we left I asked the grandma about her life before the Chinese revolution in 1949. She replied, the entire family lived in only two old-fashioned rooms at a thatched house. With eyes glistening with tears she said they had often to starve during the pre-revolution era.

In reply to a question the Director told me that a farmer needs 60,000 to 90,000 Chinese yuan (Chinese 5.50 yuan-US\$1) for building a house depending on the size and the materials used. The

Government provides interest-free loans upto 40 per cent of the total expenditure which is normally payable within three years. Attached to the village is recreation club with all facilities for indoor and outdoor games.

The villagers also own some trucks for transportation and sale of their products in the city. I was taken to a number of industries around this village in the sub-district and some of them are agro-based. If this village is taken as an advanced and more prosperous than probably others, it may nevertheless be said that the villages I had seen in other areas present more or less the same picture. Land reforms, distribution to farmers and property ownership together have worked miracles in the Chinese experiment for development and improving the lot of the millions of farmers in a country inhabited by 1,300 million people.

The last day in Shanghai was a Sunday and I was to leave for Guangzhou (Canton) in the evening by air. We spent the day visiting shopping centres and sightseeing. Roads hummed with people in a holiday mood. State-owned big

Continued on page 10