

## People and Places

# China : Through the Eyes of a Layman

by Dr M H Rashid

the body of the train were all made in China.

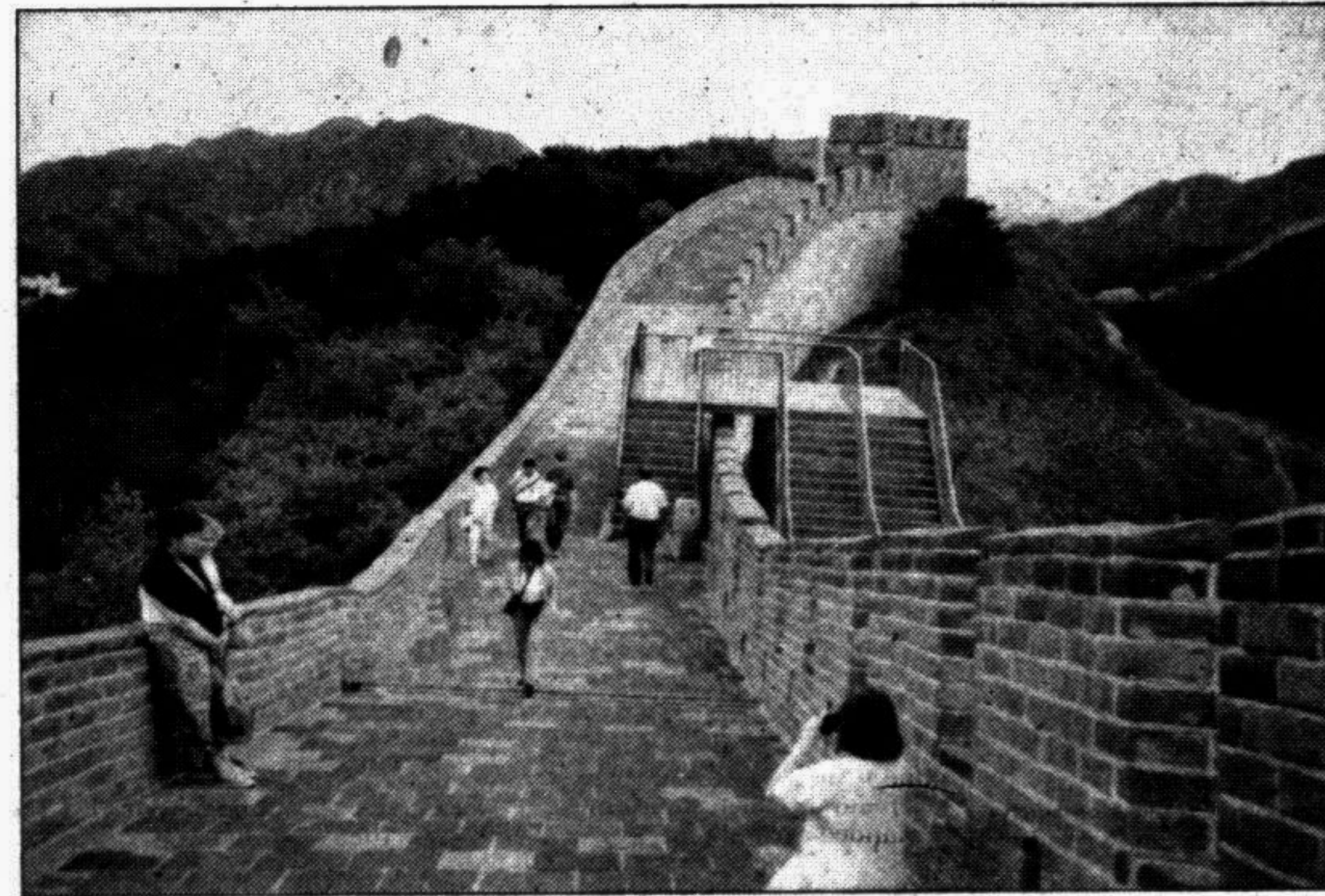
Railroad is broad gauge and on prestressed concrete sleepers. We felt no jerk nor any discomfort in the journey. In fact, we enjoyed the trip very much and became enthralled with the scenic beauty along the rail road. We noticed the simple but neat and clean rail stations with uniformed station master passing our fast train as well as the outside landscape lined with trees on both sides. We also saw through the glass as the train is air-conditioned, the small houses of farmers, brick walls with earthen tile roofs. The farmers were working with power tillers to plough the land and also to haul the produce and other goods. Several houses, perhaps, form a village and each house has a brick-wall covered courtyard as we often notice in Bangladesh.

News. History, however, differs and believes that the city was established as a cantonment by the armies of the great emperor Qin Shi Huangdi whose capital was in Xi'an, around 212 B.C. Later, around seventh century AD, this became the first international port of China. Arabs and Europeans went to China for trade and missionary purposes.

The name Canton, some say, was coined by the Portuguese. An Arab trader, believed to be an uncle of our Prophet Mohammad (most probably a very close associate, Hazrat Abu Wakkas Malik Bin Wa'eb, father of General Saad) berthed his flotilla on the bank of the Pearl river and established in 627 A.D. the first Mosque of China, the Huaisheng Mosque, in indigenous Chinese architecture, with a 82ft lotus-bud minaret that also served as a light

Bengal and military expeditions in India. The Chinese revolted against the British and suffered a very cruel defeat resulting in huge loss of lives and territory. Samian island still today preserves some of the old colonial buildings of that time. Here Dr Sun Yatsen first established the Republic of China and Mao Zedong set up a school to teach Chinese peasants the fundamentals of revolution.

We visited a school in front of an old 16th century Confucious Temple which still exists at the back. We also visited the Dr Sun Yatsen Memorial Hall, a marvellous piece of indigenous Chinese architecture. It is a beautiful octagonally-shaped auditorium with roof of blue ceramic tiles and all sorts of eye-catching decorations inside. It has a stage and column-free seating provision of 5000 audiences at



The Great Wall near Beijing

among the well-to-do villagers only. The eastern coastal area is plain and fertile land, starting below Guangzhou and stretching beyond Beijing, but divided by the river Yangzi near Nanjing, in two distinct parts. The southern part produces rice, tea, silk, tropical fruits and vegetables whereas the northern part produces grains and sweet potatoes. The southern stretch enjoys the benefit of plenty of irrigation water due to the generosity of those two mighty rivers guided by proper water management, whereas the north is now experiencing the shortage of it. Still the landscape of the vast distance of about 2000 miles from Guangzhou to Beijing is lush green as seen from the rail coach except for a small strip near Tianjin (port and modern manufacturing centre, 87 miles south of Beijing), where the railroad cut through limestone hills with numerous cement and lime factories lying on both sides of the railway. We did not have the opportunity to visit the cement factory in Tianjin. But I got a chance by virtue of my meagre association with the cement factories of Bangladesh; I was aware that China established a modern, completely computerized design centre for cement and related industries in Tianjin. It is also interesting to know that China is at present the largest cement producing country of the world.

After three hours of pleasant and interesting journey, our train steamed in at the Guangzhou rail station where we were greeted by a lively young man waving a placard with our names written in bold English letters. He was Fang, our guide and interpreter. For non-Chinese tourists like us, the communication gap forms a serious problem as the Chinese often know very little English and I do not know Chinese at all. However, Fang took us for lunch to the famous Guangdong restaurant before leaving us off at the White Swan Hotel for a little rest. At 3 o'clock in the afternoon, we went out for sightseeing.

Guangzhou is an ancient city on the Pearl river, about 28 miles inland from the South China Sea. According to the mythology, five celestial bodies riding on five goats established it and, still now, this belief is firmly entrenched in the minds of the people there as evident in the name of a local daily evening newspaper which calls itself as Yangcheng Wanbao or Goat City Evening

house with a beacon on the top. The tomb of the founder also exists till today in the same premise. The Pearl river has shifted its course and now it is far away from the mosque which is preserved along with the tomb by the government of China as an archaeological monument. This mosque now serves as the centre of prayer and religious activities for the several thousand Cantonese Muslims. The Roman Catholic church was established much later in the nineteenth century with 160ft high twin towers and tinted glasses, a superb piece of church architecture modelled after the European style by the French Architect Guillemin, in 1860-63. As Guangzhou was the first international port where the Europeans got entry into China, this city was the venue for the first introduction of opium trade in this vast country by the British, East India Company. The huge profit that drug money was used in financing their conquest of

a time. Dr Sun Yatsen was born in a village of the same province of Guangdong, the capital of which is this city of Guangzhou. The pavilion is dedicated to the modern author, Lu Xun, with his huge statue. We also visited the Temple of Six Banyan Trees which is said to be established in 479 AD. The main hall contains a statue of Lord Buddha, eight Luohans, the God of Medicine and Goddess of Fortune. Fr Klaus climbed up the 9-storied pagoda behind the hall when we took video shots of the place. We have had a glance of the statue of five legendary goats who were supposed to carry the five founders of the city. We enjoyed the marvellous garden of the Chen family.

The farmers market on the outskirts of the city was really amazing as it sells everything from food to artifice, and is said to be very old. We noticed live as well as dried snakes and cats for sale as food. Many roads and business places are

WESTERN businessmen and scholars may soon be hired to rebuild sections of China's 2,000-year-old Great Wall, but economists say the country's famous landmark is not the only one in need of repair.

Indeed, they say China has become increasingly desperate for foreign funds to bolster a crumbling infrastructure which could threaten the future of the government's market-style reforms.

In September, China opened its ultimate infrastructure project to foreign investment: the 6,440-km Wall, allocating US\$11.6 million for the project, 30 per cent of which was raised overseas.

Said China's Great Wall Society official Ma Keqiang: "We hope to receive more foreign investment for the huge project in the year to come."

But the figure China may need may run into billions more — not only for the Great Wall, but to install 60 million telephone lines, more than 100,000 megawatts of electrical generating capacity, 20 new or expanded airports, 16,900 kms of railway lines, 200 new port berths and more than 48,300 kms of roads in the next decade.

Fifteen years of fast-track economic changes in China have doubled cargo demand on its seaports and tripled the number of airline passengers. There are now twice the number of civilian vehicles on

China's roads compared to more than a decade ago, and energy consumption is by two-thirds.

Inadequate infrastructure has begun strangling China's economic boom, widening disparities between the flourishing coastal regions and poorer inland provinces that lack proper transport, communications and power sources to tap the new prosperity.

"Without proper transportation and other infrastructure, the inland areas are losing out," says one Chinese economist here. "The Chinese provinces are realising that building freeways not only solves their transportation problems but also is a lucrative business that generates revenues."

Beijing has now launched one of its most ambitious countryside revamp since the communists took power in 1949. But the big construction bill has Chinese officials worried that the already alarming inflation rates blow up all the more.

Still, the Central Bank has given priority to foreign-funded infrastructure expansion.

Beijing is now pushing ahead with a few mega-projects, some with the help of



The Temple of Heaven in Beijing

contemporarily built, but everywhere rows of trees were in abundance which made it a lovely and soothing promenade. This province is very fertile and, naturally, overpopulated and hence, lots of people migrated and settled in other South Asian countries and the USA. They speak Cantonese dialect which is slightly different from the official Mandarin. The overseas Chinese community still use Cantonese. After two nights' stay, we left by air for Hongzhou and reached there in two hours in the evening and were received at the airport by Mr Wang, our tour guide.

Hongzhou is on the delta of the great river Yangzi. This was an ancient town, a temporary capital also, now, of course, it is the capital of the province of Zhejiang. It is said that in the 13th century, with a population of one million, it was one of the largest cities of the world but during the second half of the last century, it was completely destroyed during the Taiping Revolution. The imperial palaces, city walls, gates and numerous canals were totally vanished. Later, it was rebuilt and now it is not only a city of great beauty but also a centre for Chinese silk and tea industries. Chinese poet, Yang Chaoying in his popular lines called the city as the paradise on earth. West Lake (Xihu) touching the city and covering an area of about two square miles is a popular excursion spot with finely decorated boats. So is the Flower Bay park with rare flowers, peonies, rocky landscaped areas, pavilions and numerous small fish ponds. This garden reminds us of the Avenue of Remembrance built by the Japanese, on the outskirts of the city of Sydney. South-west of the lake on the Moon mountain, near the Quantang river is the 197ft high Pagoda of Six Harmonies. It has seven inner stories, made of 12th century bricks whereas the 13 outer

stories of timber were recently renovated after the destruction during the Chinese revolution. We also paid a visit to the Jinsheng Silk Factory, and Dragon Well Tea Village, a series of cottage industries where famous Chinese scented tea and fine silk are produced mostly by well trained women workers. Visitors are served with scented green tea. We also made a small purchase from the silk factory.

After two nights' stay at the Dragon hotel, we left Hangzhou and after three and half hours' journey by train we reached Shanghai, the largest city, the busiest port and the industrial capital of China. Shanghai is also a city scarred by the colonial atrocities which is still marked by the existence of the old buildings near the bund on the bank of the river Huangpu. Shanghai is more like Hong Kong than any other Chinese cities and everywhere the booming construction of large multi-storied buildings under the indigenous Chinese settlements reminded one of that. We visited the nicely maintained ancient Garden of Joy (Yu Yuan) built by the gifted but eccentric architect, Zhang Nanyang in 16th century, across the zigzag bridge, lined by several old tea-houses.

The garden covers an area of 12 acres and it has artificial hills, lakes and pavilions connected by zigzag bridges. We also saw the largest TV tower of Asia under construction near the wharf area of Shanghai. We also saw the Jade Buddha Temple where there are huge jade statues, one lying and other sitting (6ft tall), believed to be collected from Burma. This temple is very famous all over China. We went on a city tour for the whole day. The city of Shanghai is a shoppers' paradise.

On May 21, we reached Nanjing (south capital) by a fast train. Nanjing (formerly Nanking) is one of the most beautiful cities in China. Its

wide tree-lined avenues, dotted with old two or three-storied wooden houses lures a tourist for a leisurely stroll. The forested purple mountains frame the city in the east with their green foliage, and give it an atmosphere which only few other Chinese towns can offer. Nanjing was the seat of the Nationalist Government for quite some time and the imposing mausoleum of Dr Sun Yatsen is also situated here. The mausoleum is at the side of the purple hill and the stepped approach road behind the main gate intercepted by two more inner gates is covered with beautiful rows of umbrella pine trees. The approach leads to the white-marble memorial hall with blue tile roof. The vault preserving the mortal remains of Dr Sun Yatsen is slightly below the flower of the memorial hall with various inscriptions on four walls reflecting his political career. An inscription in Chinese says, "The world belongs to you". This mausoleum can be compared only with the old imperial buildings.

The long destroyed palace of the Ming Emperors in the foothill encloses the mausoleum of the first Ming Emperor Hingwu which was plundered during Taiping uprising. The approach road to the tomb, Sacred Path is lined with stone animals and figures of men. This is worth seeing.

Out of all these in Nanjing, the Yangzi River Bridge appeared to be most interesting to me. Built entirely with China's own resource and technology, it has become a symbol of Chinese independence and pride. 9,000 workers constructed this bridge in eight years fighting with the strong currents of the turbulent river. The double-decked bridge, lower deck for double-line railway and top for four-lane highway was opened for public in 1968 over the 6km wide turbulent Yangzi river. The approach gates commemorate the great leadership of Mao Zedong whose constant

presence at the site encouraged the workers and graced the construction. The legend goes that when a western country turned down the urgent request for a shear machine for obvious political reasons, Mao said to his comrades that they would chop off the steel plates by their own might but the bridge construction could not be delayed. Later the Chinese engineers developed a shear machine by trial and errors.

This also is the home of the famous Nanjing University. Although history of Nanjing dates back to the fifth century B.C, it could not be possible to preserve anything except a small portion of the city wall north of Lake Mochou. North of the place near the city centre, Xinjiekou Square, stands the 36-storey Jingling Hotel. It has a revolving restaurant on the top floor from which one can get a panoramic view of the entire city while drinking and eating.

Nanjing museum of natural history preserves the bones of dinosaurs, prehistoric men and animals, and also varieties of rock samples from China. We took the night train for the fifteen hours' journey for Beijing where we reached at 12:30pm next day.

Beijing or the Northern Capital is a legendary city. It was the ancient home of Homo Sapien Erectus Pekinensis where Peking is the Romanisation of Beijing. Since 1000 AD it served as the main or subsidiary residence for a series of dynasties. It was once the capital of Kublai Khan when it was called Khanbalik or City of the Khan and flourished as a splendid winter residence of the emperors. However, the city got its present form which still survives today, by the Ming dynasty. Third Ming Emperor Yongle was the architect and town planner of no mean credit. He completed the works in three years and moved his capital from Nanjing to Beijing (northern peace) and renamed it as Beijing (northern capital). It is the only city in China that has a square layout with streets running parallel and perpendicular to each other.

The plan of Beijing followed the principles of geomancy, the traditional doctrine of winds and water, which strive to attain a harmonious relationship between human life and nature. Screened from the north by a semicircle of hills, Beijing lies in a plain that opens to the south of bounty and generosity.

Consequently, the southern gate of the city, Qianmen, was the largest, most beautiful and most sacred of its kind. The city walls and series of gates have now vanished to facilitate place for the new expansion. Even Tiananmen (heavenly peace) square has been quadrupled from its original imperial size which is now enclosed by the party office of the communist party and similar other important establishments. Ming Emperor Yongle who planned the imperial palace (now Palace Museum) with inner court (forbidden city) also planned a north-south line, keeping the imperial courts at the centre, with twin arrangements in the east as well as in the west. The Palace Museum is the former residence of the Ming and Qing dynasties and also the venue of abdication of the last Chinese Emperor Puyi of Qing dynasty

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## Great Wall of Infrastructure

The Great Wall of China is not the only infrastructure in China that is in urgent need of repair. Rajiv Chandra of Inter Press Service reports from Beijing.



the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. These include the 30-billion-dollar Three Gorges Dam, the 2,415-km Beijing-Kowloon Railway and the 2,254 km Beijing-Guangzhou expressway.

Chinese economists and policymakers say development of major highways and other infrastructural projects is the key to the country's economic future.

Building freeways is likely

US\$35 billion of which will be sought from overseas.

"This is seen as a bonanza by the construction and equipment companies around the world," says a Beijing-based Western economist.

But there is a grey side to this rosy picture. Foreign firms that have plunged into building infrastructure in China often find themselves caught in a bureaucratic trap and held down by a plodding centralised planning that still rules the realm.

Western businessmen got a taste of the reality of working on infrastructural projects in China in August when US Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown chaperoned bigwigs of US firms into signing billion-dollar telecommunications and power project deals in Beijing.

Now some of the 24 businessmen who made the trip with Brown say the project may take a while. Observes Edwin Lupberger, chairman of the New Orleans-based Energy Corp: "One thing that's clear is that businesses have to invest time as well as money in China."

Hong Kong-based tycoon Gordon Wu can confirm this. A pioneer in Chinese infrastructure projects, Wu's company built China's first six-lane

124-km long superhighway connecting Hong Kong to the southern Chinese boomtown of Guangzhou.

After repeated delays in construction and obtaining land and shoddy work by Chinese contractors, the US\$1.1 billion project was completed last July, nine months behind schedule.

Around the same time, Consolidated Electric Power Asia Ltd. Wu's vehicle for building power plants in Asia, scaled back its programme to construct 12 power plants, most of them in China.

Letters of intent had been signed with six Chinese provinces. But when Beijing hinted that foreign investors could earn no more than 12 per cent return on their equity in power projects, Wu shifted gears.

He indicated that he would re-focus his efforts on the Philippines, Indonesia and Pakistan since the Chinese mandated return was far below the 18 per cent standard benchmark in similar projects elsewhere in Asia.

But Wu has not given up on China yet. One of his firms starts construction in October on a second highway from Macao to Guangzhou. It is also pushing for approval of a 644-km highway from Guangzhou to Changsha in the central Chinese province of Hunan. Reasons: Wu: "Hong Kong's future will depend upon the development of China."