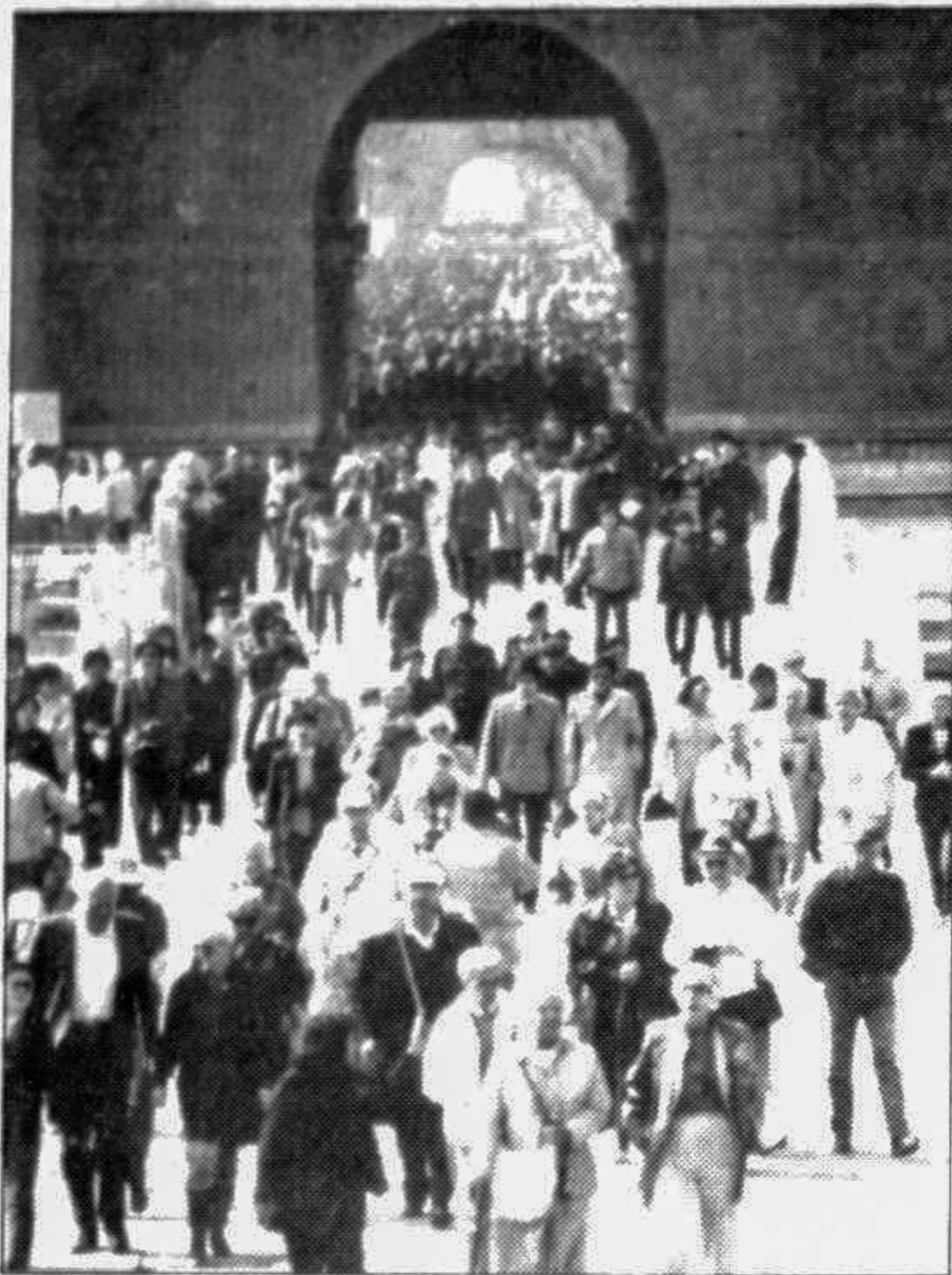


China's Tourism: Once a Pain, Now a Pleasure



Foreign tourists visiting the Forbidden City in Beijing.

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— now a misleading term since so many former farmers have moved to townships to run businesses — are also traveling for pleasure.

At the same time, in big cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, expenditure on tourism takes second place in the family budget. CNTA figures show that there were 259 million urban tourists in 1997, one million more than 1996. Each person spent an average of 600 yuan (US \$72), 12 per cent up on 1996.

CNTA also says that China received 63.47 million overseas tourists in 1998, and revenues from their travel, accommodation and spending on souvenirs hit US \$12.6 billion. With wonders of the world such as the Great Wall, Forbidden City and Terracotta Warriors and lower international air fares, China is now a realistic dream destination for many of the world's keenest travelers.

China now ranks ninth in the league table of overseas tourism host countries. And only four other countries earn more from tourism than China: they are the United States, Spain, France and Italy.

Yet 20 years ago tourism

was a fledgling industry full of hardships and hassles for those who dared to first foot. The daring were greatly restricted for security reasons in their movements. Notice boards in Beijing's suburbs warned against trespass. Now more than 1,300 cities and countries, about half the total, are open to foreign visitors with tourist visas, and such signs are few and far between.

Travel is now easier and services much improved. With the abolition of the dual track currency system in January 1994 went Foreign Exchange Certificates, the cause of so much aggravation among foreign travelers. Long gone too are the meals with cold food and warm beer and hotels whose staff just entered rooms without knocking.

Tourism in China has become a very promising leisure industry and more than just a means of earning foreign exchange," says Jiang Zhengming, a CNTN official. "So much has changed — now we have world class hotels, more reliable transportation and better products to suit our visitors' needs, not our own."

Early tourism for overseas visitors was propaganda ori-

ented and included obligatory visits to model factories, farms and schools. Such dreary ingredients have been abandoned and CNTA now assigns a theme to each year: 1999 is the Year of Ecotourism in which the country's natural and cultural heritage is being highlighted. Zhangjiajie in Hunan Province and Jiuzhaigou in Sichuan Province are two of the country's wildest and most appealing ecotour destinations.

The green theme is stretched to apply to cities as well. In Shanghai for example, the city's tourism administration launched a bicycle tour. More than 100 km long it leads free-wheelers to the canal town of Zhouzhuang in neighbouring Jiangsu Province.

But perhaps the most unusual type of tour is the technology tour which takes travelers to places where earlier foreign visitors would have been most unwelcome and certainly branded "spies". On the itinerary of a Sichuan technotour is the home of China's first atom bomb — the Chinese Physical Engineer Institute at Mianyang — and the satellite launching facility at Xichang.

Sichuan is also the province where farmers have been first to realize their resource is not only soil and water. They have clean air, space and serenity, all of which are desperately needed by city residents.

Farmers on the outskirts of Chengdu are now selling these simple pleasures of life in "farmer's entertainment" packages. Come vacation time, Chengdu folk are flocking to the countryside to smell the flowers, fish and walk.

One village in particular — Nongke in Youai township of Pixian county — has made a roaring success out of its rural resources. Then in the middle spring of 1996, state vice-president Hu Jintao put the village on the national map by dropping by to check up on the 'o'cals unique, alternative rural reforms.

The story of his visit and what the locals told him they were earning made pleasant news reading — last time Youai hit the headlines was for a famine which impoverished the country in the 1960s.

Jiang Jingui, head of the Pixian tourism administration, says there are 78 families in Nongke village, and 76 of them are devoted to receiving city guests. "The village gets around 5,000 visitors per day and average per capita incomes have shot up to 50,000 yuan (US \$ 6,000) per year."



An assembly line of Shanghai Volkswagen Co., a Chinese-German car-making joint venture.

In Search of Green and Clean Land

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The State Council requires comprehensive cooperation from all related sectors: the manufacturing of clean vehicles by automotive enterprises, more forceful enforcement of relevant laws and regulations by environmental protection agencies, and production of lead-free gasoline by refineries.

The use of leaded gasoline is now prohibited in more than 20 cities in China, and a nationwide ban will take effect on the first day of 2000. In Beijing, some taxis and buses bear the "Cleaning Fuel Car" label — meaning that they are propelled by LPG (liquefied petroleum gas) or CNG (or condensed natural gas). The Beijing municipal government is speeding up conversion of the city's 4,500 buses and 30,000 taxis into LPG-or CNG-driven ones. To support the programme, 46 LPG and CNG filling stations are being constructed in the city.

Coal-burning is another major source of pollution in Chinese cities. Each year, Beijing consumes 28 million tons of coal, 8 million tons of it for heating. Chongqing, the industrial centre of southwest China, burns 18 million tons annually, mostly a low quality variety with a high sulfur content, producing large amounts of sulfur dioxide, the cause of acid rain. For years Chongqing was notorious for its high acid rainfall frequency, which stood at a stunning 90 per cent.

For concentrated control efforts, the State Council last year approved the demarcation of a Sulfur-Dioxide Control Area and an Acid Rain Control Area, including Chongqing where the occurrence of acid rainfall has gone down, but still

remains at a shocking 70 per cent.

To reduce sulfur dioxide emissions, the government has begun to impose limitations on the production and use of coal with a high sulfur content. At the same time China is further developing cleaner energy sources including natural gas, LPG, hydropower and nuclear power, all at the expense of coal consumption. In 1997 a 1,000-km pipeline was laid to transmit natural gas from northwest China to Beijing. All cooking stoves and boilers in downtown Beijing have now switched to natural gas.

Growing Awareness

In Beijing's streets and alleys, groups of environmentalists may be seen collecting plastic bags and other garbage with bamboo tongs. Each year Beijing consumes 2.3 billion plastic bags. But for every environmentally-aware citizen there are perhaps dozens of litter louts who have no qualms about throwing away garbage wherever they may be. Lack of education is thus the biggest problem and the Chinese press and media has been quick to take up environmental issues and cover them in depth.

In April 1999, a large-scale survey found that Chinese people are more worried about environmental protection than traditional issues of concern such as corruption and public security.

In tune with the public mood, legislation on environmental protection has accelerated. Since 1979, a total of 43 environment protection-related laws have been enacted and 395 standards on environment protection worked out. Qu Geping, chairman of the Environmental and Resources

Protection Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC), China's top law-making body, said, "The important thing to do now is to enforce the laws."

In 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio De Janeiro adopted Agenda 21. Two years later the Chinese government published "China's 21st Century Agenda", the first government programme for sustained development in the world.

In 1998, the government's financial allocation for environmental protection reached more than 80 billion (US\$9.6 billion), exceeding one per cent of the GDP for the first time, according to Xie Zhenhua. He added that, in the Ninth Five-Year Plan period (1996-2000), budgetary spending for the same purpose will reach 450 billion yuan (US\$54 billion). That means a big lucrative market for businesses with environmental protection-related technologies and equipment.

Such efforts are impressive by most countries' standards, but pollution levels in their many forms remain high, largely because China's 1.3 billion people present an enormously difficult educational challenge. Whether out of ignorance, greediness or pursuance of lifestyles that are environmentally damaging, pollution continues and much of it will take a long time to clear up. The road to reversing environmental deterioration is official acknowledged to be long and hard.

Recently the State Council has released a National Ecological Environment Development Plan which puts 50 years as the time required for the nation to regain a blue sky, clean water and green land.

The Railway Sector

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way system's transport volume. It is expected that in the first decade of the next century, the length of electrified lines will increase to 16,000-18,000 km, 27 per cent of the combined length of all railways. One of the on-going projects to achieve the target is the electrification of the 900-km Harbin-Dalian Railway. The 10 billion yuan (US\$1.2 billion) project is to be completed next year.

The Ministry of Railways is planning a computerised national ticket booking system. Meanwhile, local railway authorities are trying out new ways to make ticket booking easier, like ticket booking for round-trips, telephone and internet booking, and home delivery of tickets.

An Opportunity for Foreign Investors

Just for the 1996-2000 period, the railway sector will need an estimated 350 billion yuan (US\$42 billion) to build new railways, renovate existing lines and buy locomotives. The State Fund for Railway Construction, which is based on a surcharge of per-ton-km freight transport and bank loans, certainly helps. "But that's far from being enough," Minister Fu says. "We have to open the railway sector wider still to other sources of financing,

sources whether in China and abroad."

The railway sector has so far used US\$5.2 billion in foreign funds, provided mainly by the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank or in government loans. But the Chinese Government has been cautious in allowing foreign companies to invest in railway building for state security reasons. For example, foreign companies are not allowed to be the exclusive investors even in local lines.

"This approach is changing," Minister Fu said. The Ministry of Railways is planning to recommend some local lines to foreign investors lines that call for small budgets and will yield quick return after they are put into operation. Foreign investors may also be involved in building of trunk lines, provided this does no harm to China's national interests.

Currently, some 180 Sino-foreign joint venture and cooperative projects are operating in the railway sector, providing key equipment for the country's railway construction. Meanwhile, the country has exported US\$2.4 billion worth locomotives to 20 countries and regions. "We will try to expand the export of our railway products," Fu said. "We need foreign funds and expertise to achieve the purpose."

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