

## ***A Visit to China***

I was fortunate enough, during April, to go on a trip to south-western China, arranged by Evangeline Bowen, of Petersfield, who had spent some years working as a midwife and teaching midwifery there. We went to Yunnan, Guizhou and Guangxi provinces, seeing large cities such as Kunming, Guiyang and Guilin and remote villages, many of them inhabited by minority, tribal people.

It is remarkable how the network of rural roads has been improved in recent years, enabling buses to go even to remote villages. Railways and airports have also been built on a large scale. The government seems to have been ploughing back the money coming from China's new prosperity into the improvement of the country's infrastructure, for the potential benefit of the whole population, most of who are still small farmers. What strikes you as you drive through the country is how every possible natural resource is utilized. Every foot of usable ground is cultivated, often in terraced fields no larger than a fair-sized English garden. Ploughing is by water-buffalo, or occasionally by rotavator, rice is planted out in flooded fields by hand; slow-moving water-wheels lift water from rivers to paddy-fields. Little coal mines, employing perhaps five or six people and with machinery which looks as if it had been designed by Heath Robinson, load coal into waiting lorries. Meanwhile the scenery, in most of the areas which we saw, is of outstanding beauty. Guizhou, for instance, is very hilly, most of the hills conical in shape, with very steep, wooded slopes. The little gaps between the hills are intensely cultivated, with any patches higher up the hills which are accessible also ploughed. And everything is of the most brilliant green. Fast flowing rivers which remind one of those of Devon or Wales flow through wooded gorges or terraced valleys. Many parts of China are, of course, the home of modern, large-scale industries, but this development has not led, as it easily might have done, to the neglect of traditional farming and cottage industries.

The people in the countryside have to work extremely hard. The cultivation of rice is

extraordinarily labour-intensive. But they seem healthy, and often live to great ages. Old people, as well as dead ancestors and relatives, are greatly respected, in accordance with Confucian teaching. In the early days of Communism in China, during the '*Cultural Revolution*', Confucius was decried and his books burned; churches, mosques and temples of all kinds were closed and often pulled down. But now Confucius is back in favour, and temples and other historic buildings have been rebuilt in traditional style, so that often one cannot tell at a glance whether a building is five hundred years or five years old.

The Chinese are an extremely artistic people, with a great appreciation of natural beauty. We repeatedly saw parks, beautifully laid-out with lakes, pavilions and bridges, full of people enjoying the scenery; we saw classes of school children picnicking in beautiful parts of the country, about which they would later be expected to write poems. From Guizhou we flew to Guilin in Guangxi, on the Li River, which is famous for its almost pointed limestone hills. We went down the river by boat from Guihin to Yangshuo in continual rain, but the hills looked atmospheric in the mist. Next day in Yangshuo I spent some time sitting in a cafe overlooking the river and the misty hills beyond. The view was so peaceful and beautiful as to be really spell-binding, so that one could hardly tear oneself away to return to mundane activity.

In one of the villages which we visited we met a Christian family and visited the village church. We were told that there were about fifty Christian families in the village, but others walked from neighboring villages so that they had four services each Sunday. All non Roman Catholic Churches in China have come together into a single Church of China, though each congregation keeps the type of service which they were used to when they were in separate denominations. On our last day in China, which was a Sunday, many of us attended a service at a church in one of the main streets of Kunming. As we approached you could see what looked like crowds converging on the entrance. There must have been at least a thousand people at the service, which was taken

by a visiting minister from Taiwan. The sermon, which lasted over an hour, was clearly very absorbing, though we could understand only an occasional word. The hymn tunes, led by a robed choir, were largely familiar to us, and included *'Praise God from whom all blessings flow'* and *'What a friend we have in Jesus'*. We came away convinced that the Chinese Church is very much alive and active. In fact I think that China, including Hong Kong and Taiwan, with Singapore and the Chinese Diaspora throughout the world, will have a great part to play in the future of world Christianity. Christianity in China starts from a favorable base in the strong ethical and moral tradition of Confucianism, which is very close in many ways to Christian moral teaching.

Should we think of contemporary China as Communist? Officially, of course, it is. But not any longer, I think, in the sense we normally mean. The state is authoritarian, certainly, but perhaps it needs to be. Immediate democracy would probably put power in the hands of an articulate urban minority, whose policies might easily be disastrous for rural China. The government seems to be encouraging private enterprise, which can be seen everywhere, but directing this so as to bring benefits to the whole people, thus avoiding the disastrous collapse which afflicted Russia when Communism fell. On our travels we frequently met peasant farmers whose children were at university: This raises the question of who will be willing to till the fields when education spreads so widely. That is a vast problem; but if anyone can solve it, hopefully the Chinese will.

Of course we saw many other things while we were in China. We went to a *'marriage broking'* festival amongst the Miao people where there were hundreds, perhaps thousands of people in traditional festive dress, with the girls wearing silver ornaments and headdresses; we saw lime-kilns and brick-kilns at work; we visited the greatest waterfall in Asia. But my outstanding impressions overall were of the beauty of the scenery and the dignity and friendliness of a hard-working and very talented people.

***Richard Acworth***

