

# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

### **Visualizing Early 1970s China through the Lens of the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars (CCAS) Friendship Delegations**

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#### **Abstract**

This photo essay presents a selection of images contributed by members of the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars (CCAS) Friendship Delegations that traveled to China in 1971 and 1972. The CCAS was founded in March 1969 by faculty and graduate students opposed to the Vietnam War and later became a strong supporter of the reestablishment of U.S.–China relations in the 1970s. The 1971 CCAS delegation was the first group of Asian specialists to travel to mainland China after the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. The 1972 delegation’s visit came shortly after President Nixon’s historic trip. Both groups traveled throughout the country to meet with and document the lives of workers, farmers, students, government officials, and soldiers. This essay provides context and narrative via descriptive itineraries and accounts drawn from the writings of delegation members. These images and narratives provide firsthand insight into events that preceded the normalization of China–U.S. relations and also present a panoramic view of cultural and social conditions in China during the Cultural Revolution. The images are part of a digitized collection of more than two thousand slides that is being developed at the University of California, San Diego, Library.<sup>1</sup>

Keywords: Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, CCAS, U.S.–China relations, Cultural Revolution, propaganda posters, theatrical performance, acupuncture, Beijing University, Premier Zhou Enlai

#### **Introduction**

On the afternoon of June 23, 1971, after waiting for twenty-two years, the first Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars (CCAS) Friendship Delegation arrived in Guangzhou, China, in the middle of the Cultural Revolution. The fifteen Americans who made up the group, almost all in their twenties, had been studying China for years and dreaming of seeing it one day with their own eyes. To them, the U.S. table tennis team’s visit to China in April 1971 signaled something grander on the horizon. They waited anxiously in Hong Kong after turning in their applications.

Then the news came in. The excitement was beyond words: their application to visit China was approved. On Monday, June 7, they received their official invitation from the China Administration for Travel and Tourism, indicating that their monthlong trip to China would begin on June 23.



Delegation boarding the train in Kowloon, Hong Kong, headed for the border crossing to China, June 23, 1971.

Cameras, tape recorders, and notebooks filled the delegates' luggage. They were thirsty to experience real China and wanted to seize every moment. Their joy was captured in a publication titled *China! Inside the People's Republic* (henceforth, *China!*): "Our excitement overflowed, and we laughed helplessly. New shorts for comfortable traveling in the hot weather ahead, with all our equipment, made us look like thirteen overgrown campers" (CCAS 1972, 8).

Their photographic equipment became the delegation's extra set of eyes to probe into the reality of China, providing a glimpse of activities in the cities and communes, schools and factories they visited and of the livelihoods of people from many walks of life. Thanks to color film, China and its people in the 1970s no longer appeared in black and white. In an age

dominated by uniformity and non-middle-class cultural styles, the delegation saw vibrant colors and joyful artistic patterns decorating the shirts and skirts of schoolgirls. The farmland and mountains were not dire gray; they were many shades of green accentuated by the light blue sky. Between reciting Chairman Mao quotations and performing rituals of loyalty, people carried on with their lives through day-to-day work. The early 1970s witnessed a degree of routineness after the initial urban unrest of the late 1960s (Clark 2008, 7).

This first delegation of the CCAS concluded its trip in thirty-one days after traveling to Guangzhou, Shanghai, Suzhou, Nanjing, Beijing, Dazhai, Taiyuan, and Yanan. The second delegation of twenty-nine members set foot in China less than a year later, in early March 1972, just ten days after Nixon finished his historic visit. This larger delegation was split into two groups. One group followed a route along the coast, visiting Guangzhou, Shanghai, Wuxi, Jinan, Tianjin, and Tangshan. The other group went inland. Although the two delegations traveled on different routes and during different times, many common themes and notable scenes emerged from the thousands of photo slides they brought home.

### **Welcome and Send-off Scenes**

In the early 1970s, China and the United States slowly began to reestablish diplomatic relations through a series of people-to-people dialogues and activities. The historic visit to China by the U.S. table tennis team to compete against the Chinese national team opened the door for future exchanges, including Nixon's visit to China in 1972. The CCAS delegations' visits in 1971 and 1972 were two of many exchanges occurring at the grassroots level before China and the United States established formal diplomatic relations in 1979 (He 2017).

The first delegation went to thirty-one different local organizations, which included "factories, rural communes, hospitals, schools, local governments, housing settlements, retail stores, and research units" (CCAS 1972, 51). The second delegation visited work units of a similar nature, some in the same cities and communes visited by the first delegation, including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Dazhai. Many of the photos taken during both trips depict scenes of hosts welcoming and sending off their American guests.

Through the delegates' lenses, we see workers, hospital staff, teachers, students, and children congregating at the entrances of their workplaces to welcome the visitors. These scenes were highly routinized, with people assembled and standing on each side of the institutions'

gates. On some occasions, the groups were so large that lines of people extended to the outskirts of the entrance, creating a wide aisle for the delegation. People applauded and waved to the delegation members when they arrived. Small children, too young to grasp the meaning of these visits, were encouraged by their teachers to clap and wave their hands to welcome the foreign visitors. The outpouring of warmth and enthusiasm is evident in many photos. In some cases, the groups played drums and gongs and performed theatrical dances as part of the welcoming ceremonies. One local woman, a member of the Chinese militia, approached the delegation to tell them that “although we are in the militia to defend China, we are not enemies of American people.... [W]e know you, and most Americans, do not support the U.S. government policies, and we want to be friends. We feel no hostility for [*sic*] the American people” (CCAS 1972, 67).



Teaching a child how to clap a welcome for foreign visitors, summer 1971.

As the visit progressed, the delegation commented that “everywhere, too, the people of China made the same distinction between our groups, as representatives of the American people, and the U.S. government.... Because of this, there was no hesitation on their part in offering us their full friendship—everywhere, without question, the Chinese were warm, open and quick to accept us” (CCAS 1972, 67). The same impression was reiterated by delegate William Joseph after he came back: “We were never treated with anything but the greatest warmth where we went,” even in a time of heightened tension in Vietnam (Joseph 1972, 10). The same level of friendliness was also seen at sending-off scenes. From a slowly departing train, delegation members waved goodbye and expressed their gratitude to their Chinese hosts.



CCAS group bidding farewell as their train departs, summer 1971.

### **Propaganda Posters**

Propaganda art permeated every corner of life during the Cultural Revolution; therefore, it features prominently in the delegation’s photographs. These images served to disseminate Mao’s instructions and to model mass behavior. Propaganda posters were found on the streets and in work units, classrooms, parks, and domestic living spaces. CCAS members observed and

documented the overwhelming presence of these posters, whose contents ranged from general messages of proletarian solidarity to specific instructions for various political movements, from images of model workers and peasants to iconic illustrations of Chairman Mao.

One mural that stood out among many was the depiction of Mao waving to his followers after his historic swim in the Yangtze River in 1966. This prime moment was later rendered in various artistic formats to demonstrate Mao's everlasting vigor and undefeatable leadership (Schoppa 2011, 245). The mural was designed to be an oversized work, dwarfing the person who stood in front of it.



Huge mural celebrating Mao's historic 1966 swim in the Yangtze River, summer 1971.

At the dawn of China's rapprochement with the United States, the level of hostile propaganda directed toward the United States remained high, as indicated by a quantitative study of anti-U.S. rhetoric in the *Peking Review* throughout 1970 and 1971 (Garver 1980, 217). During the CCAS visits, a series of propaganda posters denouncing American imperialism caught the eye of both delegations. In the context of the founding statement of CCAS,<sup>2</sup> those messages resonated with the sentiment of many members. Much to the second delegation's amusement, the pastry chef at the guesthouse in Tangshan made a special cake with pink icing spelling out "Down with American imperialism" in Chinese characters. Joseph wrote in his memoir that the message on the cake was a testament to both sides' strong opposition to U.S. policy in Vietnam (Joseph 2013, 25). Since they had learned that Chinese people drew a clear distinction between the American people and the American government, delegation members did not take offense at the cake; rather, they felt that it displayed a sense of humor.



"Down with American imperialism" cake served at a banquet hosted by the Tangshan branch of the China Travel Service, April 1, 1972.

### **Theatrical Performance**

In addition to seeing propaganda posters everywhere, delegation members also found themselves immersed in a culture electrified by theatrical performances. These performances were an integral part of their China experience and were as routinized as the formal receptions

they received in each city: “It was the same at every commune and school we visited: every unit has a cultural troupe of some sort” (CCAS 1972, 247). Performance was ubiquitous in both urban and rural settings and was well documented in many photos, including live scenes of theatrical performances as well as images of posters and murals.

Eight model revolutionary theatrical works were identified in May 1967 by Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing, and her allies to guide all art and literary works during the Cultural Revolution (King et al. 2010, 167). In one massive street mural, two operas and two ballets are recognizable: “Hongdeng ji” (The red lantern), “Sha jia bang” (Shajiabang), “Hongse niangzi jun” (The red detachment of women), and “Baimao nü” (The white-haired girl). The government-sponsored opera and ballet troupes performed these works in every major city, and smaller-scale troupes gave performances locally as part of a nationwide effort after 1967 to duplicate the original performances (King et al. 2010, 179).



An example of a massive street mural depicting model revolutionary ballets and operas promoted by Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing. South China, summer 1971.

In addition to the adapted versions of the eight models, many other revolutionary performances were choreographed, practiced, and performed feverishly across the nation. Villagers also enjoyed variety skits in the open air on hot summer nights. A number of photos show village youth performing routines for the first delegation. And, on March 13, 1972, the day the second delegation arrived in Wuxi, a “Little Red Guard” troupe welcomed the visitors with a song and dance performance. The well-trained young performers presented a range of acts, including one in which children played table tennis under a sign marked “Friendship first, competition second.” This symbolic rendition of the U.S. table tennis team’s visit to China in April 1971 left quite an impression on Joseph, who recorded the event in his memoir (Joseph 2013, 61).



Wuxi Little Red Guards performing a ping-pong song and dance routine under a “Friendship first, competition second” sign, April 1972.

### Acupuncture Therapy

A small group of photos among the thousands made by the CCAS delegations depicts rarely seen images of acupuncture therapy during the Cultural Revolution. The first delegation was taken to the Guangzhou Deaf-Mute School,<sup>3</sup> known at that time for its experimental use of

acupuncture to treat deafness. One photo shows a People's Liberation Army (PLA) member inserting an acupuncture needle into a student's lower arm. The PLA's presence and role as medical staff were the result of Mao's decision to place members of the army in civilian and public administration. The delegation recounted that "the needle was long, thin, and silvery in color," and that the PLA member "inserted the needle to a depth of about one-and-a-half inches, rotating it gently" (CCAS 1972, 61). The feedback they gathered from the school indicated that not all of the students responded to the treatment equally well.



Female medical workers from a military unit using acupuncture to treat children at the Guangzhou Deaf-Mute School, June 25, 1971. Books of quotations from Mao can be seen on each desk.

Two photos were taken during a performance by the students of the Guangzhou Deaf-Mute School. One photo shows a skit in which a soldier provides medical care for the villager, most likely using acupuncture on the ear. The other photo captures a group of female students dancing and singing. The large character signs behind the students show a fragment of the once-popular slogan "Qiannian tieshu kai le hua, Rujin yaba kaikou shuole hua" ("The fact that mutes can eventually speak in the new era is as magical as flowers blooming out of an iron tree"). This slogan originated in the 1969 documentary film *Chairman Mao's Victory on a Proletarian*

*Health Route*, which depicted the inspirational story of a mute and deaf village girl who, after going through acupuncture treatment, learned to shout out “Long live Chairman Mao!” (Hong 1969). The performance at the school echoed a nationwide call for the use of acupuncture to treat the mute and deaf.



Young people staging a revolutionary performance featuring a soldier providing medical care, June 25, 1971.

What the CCAS delegations found even more dramatic about this ancient Chinese medical technique was the use of acupuncture for pain relief in the operation room. Two photos provide a glimpse of surgeries assisted with acupuncture anesthesia. The fact that both delegations were invited to observe and take photos of such surgical procedures suggests that China wanted the Western world to know how rigorously and effectively the ancient technique was being adopted in the medical field. Indeed, press coverage of surgeries in China using

acupuncture anesthesia incited the curiosity of the Western medical world and led to a brief period of popularity of acupuncture therapy in the United States (Kaptchuk 1983, ix).

### Visits to Beijing University

As the intellectual hub of China since the early twentieth century, Beijing University has played a central role in a series of social movements, in some instances setting the tone for those movements. The university went through a period of turbulence from 1966 to 1968, when violent conflicts among factions led to a complete halt in teaching and research. Administrators and scholars became “struggle objects.” Order was restored by the end of the 1960s, and soon major universities including Beijing University began to redesign their curricula and enroll students again (Jian, Song, and Zhou 2006, 319). Against this backdrop, CCAS delegations found themselves on the serene and beautiful campus of Beijing University in 1971 and 1972. Many photos show a prominent presence of PLA members and older students, a reflection of the army’s involvement in university administration and of an admission policy that recruited only worker, peasant, and soldier students. Several photos document the encounters of CCAS members with university president Zhou Peiyuan, a U.S.-trained physicist, and Zhou Yiliang, a renowned historian.



President Zhou Peiyuan joining foreign visitors for lunch at the newly reopened Beijing University campus, July 6, 1971.

CCAS delegation members recount in *China!* that they had opportunities to share meals in the dining hall with Zhou and students. In these photos, CCAS members and their hosts appear relaxed and engaged in conversation. Both sides were eager to exchange views on current issues regarding China, the United States, and the world. One student approached the delegation and asked why the Black Panthers had split into two factions—a question that surprised the American visitors. The student explained that she had read about this development in the English-language magazines and newspapers at the library (CCAS 1972, 218). The CCAS delegation was impressed by the student's keen interest in U.S. domestic issues.

### **Meeting with Premier Zhou Enlai**

The highlight of the China experience for members of each delegation came when they met with Premier Zhou Enlai toward the end of their trips. Though not a total surprise, as meeting with Zhou was one of their requests before leaving for China, the time and location had been kept undisclosed. During lunch on July 19, 1971, the first delegation was told not to leave the hotel, as an unspecified special meeting had been arranged. In the evening, the group was bused to the Great Hall of the People and greeted by Zhou at the door of one of the meeting rooms. The delegates' first impression of Zhou was that "his calm, aging face—with the bushy black eyebrows and quick, and humorous eyes—[was] familiar" (CCAS 1972, 294). Zhou's relaxed and warm temperament immediately put the American guests at ease. As Susan Shirk, a member of the first delegation, recalled in a 1971 newspaper article, they were "nervous and stiff" when they saw him in person, but thrilled right away with his charming and brilliant air. When they were introduced by their self-chosen Chinese names, Zhou quickly translated back into English (Shirk 1971). He also frequently made personal references to them as individuals, a sign that he had been well briefed and was a master at engaging guests on a personal level. During the four-hour conversation, Zhou revealed his willingness to talk with representatives of the U.S. government and reaffirmed the basic principles of Chinese foreign policy. He also remarked on issues relating to Taiwan, the Indochina war, the remilitarization of Japan, and a series of current international affairs.<sup>4</sup>

The second delegation's meeting with Zhou on April 11, 1972, was arranged in a similar manner: members were notified late at night that they would meet with some Chinese officials in ten minutes (Joseph 1972, 1). This group, unlike the first delegation, was asked not to use tape

recorders or make an official transcript. In the article he published shortly after the visit, Joseph guessed that two main factors might have contributed to the restriction. Chinese officials may have wanted to avoid being seen answering potentially embarrassing questions raised by CCAS members, who were known to pose hard questions, especially regarding speculations about the downfall of Lin Biao in September 1971. Another factor may have been the new escalation of the war in Indochina. Since China had not formulated an official response yet, there wasn't much to be expected from Zhou at that time.



Four-hour meeting with Premier Zhou Enlai in the Great Hall of the People, July 19, 1971. Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan (arrested in 1976 as members of the Gang of Four) were introduced by Zhou and participated in the meeting.

The meeting with the second delegation also lasted more than four hours and had a light and casual atmosphere. Joseph echoed the first delegation's impressions of Zhou, recounting that he "showed an amazing grasp of the details" (Joseph 1972, 11–12) and demonstrated "knowledge of a special problem in a special area of the U.S." and "a familiarity with the details of our trip in China" (11–12). Joseph described Zhou "as a man of great intellect" whose warmth and charm were unforgettable (11–12). Stephen MacKinnon, also a member of the second

delegation, recalled a moment when Zhou was corrected by his staff on a fact regarding Anthony Eden's dual role in the British government.<sup>5</sup> MacKinnon was surprised to see such an easy exchange of ideas between Zhou and his subordinates (MacKinnon 2008, 370). In his memoir, MacKinnon vividly presented an anecdote about Yao Wenyuan, then a key member of the Political Bureau, in which Yao described being caught in an awkward moment of eating a piece of cream puff that got stuck on his sleeve while sitting next to Zhou.

## Conclusion

The photos selected for the accompanying essay are only a small sampling of digitized images out of a collection of more than two thousand photo slides. Many capture recognizable moments that bear historic markings. Some worthy of highlighting include the delegations' encounters with the labor models Wu Guixian and Chen Yonggui, their visits with cadres at a May Seventh Cadre School, and their visit to Yan'an.<sup>6</sup>

Although these photos were taken during monthlong spans in 1971 and 1972, respectively, an impressive range of social phenomena, living conditions, and human behavior in the midst of the Cultural Revolution was captured with the cameras and pens of the American visitors. Though temporally and geographically limited, their experiences managed to encompass important ongoing events, such as the unfolding of the rapprochement of China–U.S. relations and the rebuilding of Beijing University. The delegates also witnessed the impact of countless political movements that began during the Cultural Revolution: the big character posters, propaganda arts, model theatrical performances, sent-down youth, proliferation of acupuncture therapy, model communes, and many others.

Furthermore, the rarely seen moments of conversation between CCAS delegations and Premier Zhou Enlai provide a snapshot view of a historic period when the exchange of ideas between American grassroots organizations and Chinese officials was being facilitated and fostered. From 1971 to 1979, the Chinese government received visits from an array of American groups and individuals (Song and Li 1997; Zhou 1993). The two delegations of the CCAS were at the forefront of this wave, thus serving as a prelude to the normalization of China–U.S. relations and shedding light on the significance of such dialogues.

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## Notes

- 1 This digital archive is being developed at the University of California, San Diego, Library and will be available at the end of 2017. Photos were contributed by Professor Paul Pickowicz (University of California, San Diego) and Professor William Joseph (Wellesley College), who also provided captions for the images included in this photo essay. Works from the photo collection of Professor Stephen MacKinnon (Arizona State University) will be added to the project soon.
- 2 The CCAS's founding statement, dated March 30, 1969, can be found at <http://criticalasianstudies.org/about-us/bcas-founding-statement.html>. (The *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* (BCAS) is a peer-reviewed journal launched by CCAS.)
- 3 At the time, the school's name was the Canton Deaf-Mute School.
- 4 The complete transcript of the meeting is included in *China! Inside the People's Republic* (CCAS 1972), 331–371.
- 5 Robert Anthony Eden served as the United Kingdom's Foreign Secretary (1935–1955) and Prime Minister (1955–1957).
- 6 Wu Guixian and Chen Yonggui, based in model communes, were not only labor models but also vice premiers of China appointed by Mao in 1975. The May Seventh Cadre School was also an outcome of political movement during the Cultural Revolution, in which civil servants were forced to do hard labor to follow the mass line. Yan'an represents the heroic phase of the Chinese Communist Revolution. It was the headquarters of the Communist army between 1937 and 1945 and of the civil war between 1945 and 1949. The CCAS delegation visited Mao, Lin, and other leaders' old residences and various historic sites in Yan'an.

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