

Prof. William A. Joseph
Department of Political Science
Wellesley College

Serve the People! Photographs of Daily Life During the Cultural Revolution

[About the Project](#) | [Viewing the Photos](#) | [Acknowledgements](#) | [Other Photos and Videos](#)
[More on the Cultural Revolution](#)



A village building with the slogan 'Serve the People' in Mao Zedong's calligraphy.

About the Project

The photographs on this website were taken in March-April 1972 when I was a participant in the second delegation of the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars (CCAS) to the People's Republic of China (PRC).

This was my first visit to China and took place during a middle phase of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, Chairman Mao Zedong's decade-long (1966-76) ideological crusade to purge China of all "reactionary" influences and keep the country on the road towards his vision of communism.

CCAS was formed in March 1969 by faculty and graduate students in Asian Studies in opposition to the war in Vietnam. ([CCAS Statement of Purpose](#)). It also became a strong proponent for the normalization of relations between the United States and the PRC. Because of the long-standing

Cold War hostility between the two countries, few Americans had visited China since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 -- and few foreigners of any kind had been there since the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966.

The first CCAS delegation was invited to China in mid-1971 during the early stages of Sino-American rapprochement, which had become publicly visible only with the visit to China by the US table tennis team in April of that year (see: [History in Five: Nicholas Griffin on PING-PONG DIPLOMACY](#)). The organization's "progressive" political positions -- and the fact that there was an active chapter in Hong Kong made up of American Asia scholars doing research -- were among the most important serendipitous factors that led CCAS to get such an early invitation to visit China. (For more on the first CCAS delegation to China, see [Conversations with History: Interview with Susan Shirk, Professor, School of International Relations and Pacific Studies, University of California at San Diego.](#))



Little Red Guards cultural performance. Sign reads "Friendship first, competition second."

The second CCAS delegation entered China from Hong Kong on March 10, 1972, which was shortly after President Richard M. Nixon had concluded his historic trip to the PRC (see [Assignment: China - The Week That Changed The World](#)). There were 29 members of the delegation, though we split up into two traveling groups after just two days, each group taking a different route through China until we came together again in Beijing on April 3rd. We left China and returned to Hong Kong on April 14th.



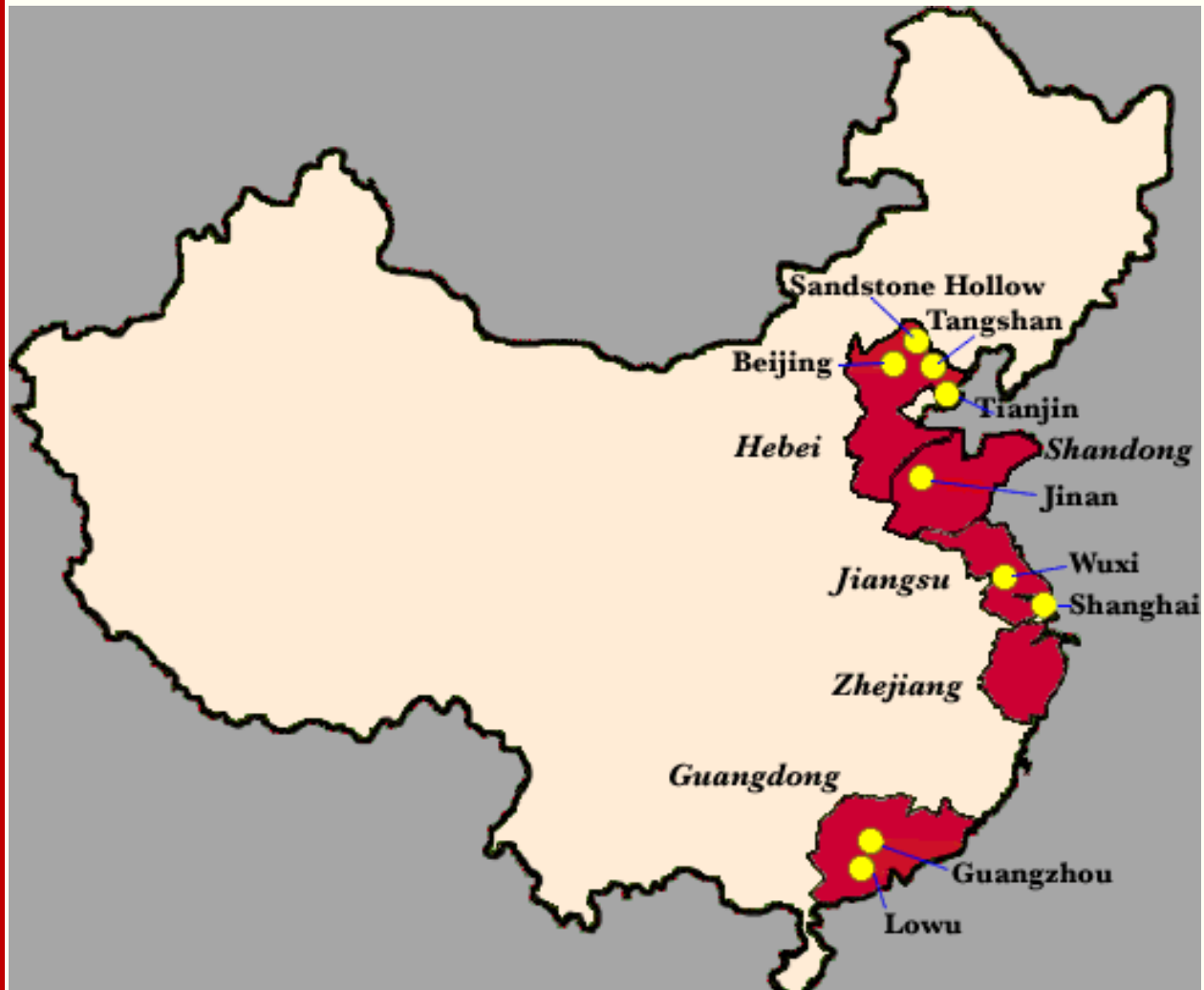
The entry point at Lowu where our delegation entered China in March 1972.

A visit to China, even a very brief, geographically limited, and politically restricted one, was a unique and rare opportunity at that time not only because it was so early in the Sino-American détente, but also because it was during the middle of Cultural Revolution. This movement had been launched in 1966 when Mao unleashed millions of student Red Guards to destroy the “four olds” (old ideas, old culture, old customs, old habits and ferret out hidden counter-revolutionaries in every nook and cranny of society.)

Because of the wanton destructiveness, brutality, and factionalism of the Red Guards, Mao ordered the suppression of the movement by the military in 1968. By early 1969, order had been restored to the country and millions of Red Guards had been dispatched to the rural areas to be “re-educated” by the peasants.

In early 1972, when my delegation visited China, the overall political situation seemed peaceful - on the surface. The Cultural Revolution was then in a stage of consolidation and construction during which many of the radical ideals and ideas of the movement were being put into practice. “Capitalist Roaders” had been removed from power in party, government, educational, cultural, economic, and other institutions. Authority was in the hands of “revolutionary committees” made up of political activists, officials (“cadres”) who had survived the purge, and officers of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The military had had a prominent role in Chinese politics since the suppression of the Red Guards. But that was ending by early 1972 because, Lin Biao, the head of the PLA and Mao's one-time close comrade and chosen successor, had been killed in a plane crash in September 1971 allegedly after attempting a coup d'etat against the Chairman. ([See “Lin Biao flew too close to the sun. But why did he really fall?”](#))

The institutions we visited - including factories large and small, rural people's communes, schools at all levels from daycare centers to universities (which had only recently reopened after being closed since near the start of the Cultural Revolution), museums, a prison, health care facilities (clinics, surgical hospitals, a mental hospital), residential neighborhoods - were all being run by revolutionary committees, though with communist party leaders clearly in charge. All of these institutions were ostensibly operating according to the guiding principles of the Cultural Revolution and Mao Zedong Thought: "Serve the People!" "Never Forget Class Struggle!" "Women Hold Up Half of Heaven!"



Map of places visited by my part of the delegation.

The photos present a glimpse of daily life in China during this relatively stable interlude between the ferocious struggles that define the essence of the Cultural Revolution. But even then an untold number of people, particularly intellectuals, were suffering physical and psychological persecution at the hand of radical power-holders - part of a reign of terror that would intensify as Mao's estranged wife, Jiang Qing and her three closest allies ("The Gang of Four") attempted to fill the power vacuum left by the fall of Lin Biao. Indeed, the Cultural Revolution would be declared formally over in October 1976 only after the Gang of Four was arrested less than a month after Mao's death. (See: [Chinese Propaganda Posters, "Jiang](#)

[Qing.”](#)) In less than two years, Deng Xiaoping, who had been purged early in the Cultural Revolution as a "capitalist roader" had taken power as China's paramount leader.

And, as we all know, down the capitalist road is exactly where Deng took China...

For a scholarly analysis of the history and politics of CCAS, see Fabio Lanza, [The End of Concern: Maoist China, Activism, and Asian Studies](#) (Duke University Press, 2017).

Viewing the Photos

The photos I took in the People's Republic of China March-April 1972 can be viewed at the [Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars Friendship Delegations Collection](#) hosted by the University of California, San Diego Library. This site contains not only my photos, but also those of other members of both the first and second CCAS delegations to the PROC

The following keywords were used to classify my images. Users may find it helpful to use one or more of them as search terms:

- children, elderly, historical sites, women
- urban, rural
- agriculture, culture, daily life, education, industry, health care, politics
- Beijing, Border (Lowu), Guangzhou, Jinan, Lowu, Shanghai, Shashiyu (Hebei), Tangshan, Tianjin, Wuxi, Zunhua (Hebei)

You can search for these terms or various combinations such as "Beijing AND children" or "Shanghai AND industry."

The site also has an Advanced Search function

Ponder... and Enjoy

Acknowledgements

I want to thank the following people at Wellesley College without whom bringing these images into the digital age would not have been possible: Giuliana Funkhouser '04; Joyce Hsu '05; Mimi Lai '06; Devyani Parameshwar '06; and Kenny Freundlich, Michael Hawkins, and David O'Steen, all of Wellesley's Library and Technology Services. Jennifer Bartle and Marci Hahn-Fabris, also of LTS, were instrumental in moving the photos to Shared Shelf and making them available to the UCSD collection. At USCD, I am grateful to Xi Chen, the Chinese Studies Librarian and Cristela Garcia-Spitz, the Digital Initiatives Librarian.

Others photos and videos

[Photos from the Delegation's Meeting with Premier Zhou Enlai](#)

[Return to Tangshan \(Video; CCTV\)](#) July 2006

Sandstone Hollow Revisited (Photos) July 2006 [link coming]

[Return to Wuxi: From 1972-2012](#) (Video; Wuxi TV)

More on the Cultural Revolution

[A Brief Overview of the Cultural Revolution](#)

[Time Line of the Cultural Revolution](#)

[Suggested Readings on the Cultural Revolution](#)

[Selected Internet Links on The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution](#)



Shanghai Industrial Exhibition Hall. Sign reads ""Work hard, strive to be the best, and build socialism faster, better and more economically!"