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## China on the Capitalist Road

By David Bensman

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IN 2005, China experienced more than seventy five thousand public protests in rural villages and urban factories. These bursts of discontent appear to have made a deep impression on China's party leaders. As in nineteenth-century Europe, the specter of revolution calls forth reform. But the capitalist road has lots of twists and turns. A recent trip to Beijing presented a myriad of images:

- A Hyundai factory with 1,100 young male workers privileged to work six twelve-hour shifts weekly on ultramodern assembly lines, producing five different car models
- The Wal-Mart retail store in the University district with more red-shirted employees than shoppers
- Posters in English warning that law breakers will be "severely punished"
- A battered flatbed truck, piled high with folded cardboard boxes, blocking traffic in an old-style residential district
- A Chinese professor systematically detailing the inadequacies of government unemployment statistics
- A Japanese reporter dropping by the office of a nongovernmental organization devoted to civic education to interview an environmental activist funded by Western foundations
- And, most unforgettably, entertainers clad in Russian army uniforms singing *The Internationale* at the request of American tourists at a popular Ukrainian restaurant/nightclub. (Our host, a Chinese native who had returned after decades in New York to work for an investment bank, raising corporate money for the education of the children of migrant workers, explained to us that the entertainers were former members of Russian military marching bands, for whom Beijing offered a better opportunity to make a living than postcommunist Ukraine.)

Most surprising of all in the seat of China's national government was the openness with which people criticized China's current position on the capitalist road. Now that the government has announced reform efforts to reduce rural poverty, end environmental degradation, raise the status of migrant workers, promote corporate social responsibility, strengthen labor unions, eliminate official corruption, and improve enforcement of labor laws, people freely criticize their country's shortcomings.

The migrants who leave China's impoverished rural areas have no citizenship rights in the cities, one

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activist explained to us. Under the *hukuo* system, their citizenship resides in their rural village of origin. When they come to the city to work, they have no access to full citizenship rights or to schools. If their employer fails to pay them (a not uncommon occurrence) their cases are not prosecuted the same way as citizens' cases are. However, there are some lawyers and nongovernmental organizations that have set up worker centers to press the migrants' claims. And the national government has urged urban administrations to grant migrants citizenship rights. But city dwellers look down on migrants seeing them as poor, backward, undesirable; they don't want to give migrants access to city services or a voice in municipal affairs. Still, in the divisions between one administrative level and the others there is room for social criticism, voluntary associations, and even international solidarity.

The same thing is true when it comes to environmental action. The Chinese government sponsored dozens of irresponsible megaprojects that turned farmland into desert and filled rivers with industrial wastes. Now, that same government is pushing for environmental protection and blaming local governments for greedy, thoughtless development projects. Between these levels, environmental activists can organize protests and cultivate media outlets.

When it comes to rural poverty, the government has announced a major change of direction. After nearly three decades of taxing the countryside to pay for urban industrialization, the national government agreed to eliminate rural taxes last January. This could slow the exodus of young people fleeing the countryside to try their luck in urban factories, where they work seventy-hour weeks and live in dormitories. But for local governments in the poorer regions, brokering the labor migration has been a source of wealth, and it won't be surrendered willingly.

Even the All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), a devoted instrument of the Communist Party, comes in for criticism. Everybody agrees, we were told at a Renmin University Conference on Labor Rights and Labor Standards Under Globalization, that China is a country of "strong government, weak unions." Now the country needs stronger unions to advocate for the rights of workers.

The ACFTU's base was in the state-owned enterprises that are either being dismantled or are suffering massive reductions in the work force. Its traditional stance has been to ignore China's two hundred million urban migrants. Is this changing? One student told me that her father, an official of a provincial union in the southeast, goes through Guangzhou's urban districts urging shopkeepers and workshop managers to improve conditions and to allow their (migrant) employees to affiliate with the ACFTU. I did not hear a word about independent unions, however.

**THE RENMIN CONFERENCE** was itself a sign that Chinese academics are reaching out to colleagues in the West in the hope of strengthening academic disciplines concerned with such things as corporate ethics, labor law, and monitoring of labor standards. The government seems to be giving its blessing. Does this provide an opening for Western intellectuals to play a role in helping Chinese colleagues create a society with greater freedom for inquiry? Perhaps. But don't forget how Google was manipulated to help the authorities control dissent. For Western intellectuals eager to gain access to Chinese society, the temptation to let oneself be used is powerful.

That the Chinese leadership is willing to risk public criticism and engagement with foreign intellectuals suggests that last year's seventy five thousand public protests in rural villages and urban factories have made a deep impression. As in nineteenth-century Europe, the specter of revolution calls forth openness and reform. But the capitalist road has lots of twists and turns.

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