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The “Other China”

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Western China is more rural and less developed than the China eastern coastal provinces Photo: Louise Lief

We've recently returned from the May 8-22, 2010 IRP gatekeeper trip to China. The [gatekeeper editors](#) who accompanied us met with a number of senior Chinese officials and organizations in Beijing, and then explored health, development and environmental issues in Sichuan and Yunnan, two provinces in southwest China far from the capital.

If there was a theme to this trip, it was the “Other China.” We chose to forego visiting the more prosperous eastern coastal cities of Shanghai and Guangzhou in favor of China's hinterland, the less developed western provinces that lag behind development on the coast and furnish many of the migrant laborers that power China's factories and its economic juggernaut.

China's central government has been so concerned by the economic disparity between western China and the coastal provinces and the resulting potential for unrest that for the last ten years it has launched a national development campaign called "Open Up the West" to close the income gap between eastern and western China. Six western provinces, including Sichuan and Yunnan, and five autonomous regions, including Xinjiang and Tibet, are part of this program.

We went to see how China's economic development played out in these more rural areas of the country, and how China is coping with the severe pollution problems that have come as a result of its rapid industrialization in these ecologically fragile regions.

Yunnan and Sichuan have some of China's most breathtaking scenery – majestic mountain peaks, wild rivers and deep gorges, plateau lakes, temperate forests and tropical jungles. Sichuan and Yunnan are home to some of China's greatest biodiversity and many beloved endangered species, like the giant panda and golden monkey.

During our two-week visit, we were struck by the manic pace of change. In the words of June Mei, our wonderful interpreter and a China historian, "The speed of change has outstripped China's ability to manage change." Dozens of construction cranes were visible everywhere, as old neighborhoods are demolished to make way for new high rise apartments, shopping malls, subways, bridges, tunnels, airports and high speed trains. In the Sichuan earthquake zone, entire towns have been rebuilt in the two years since the earthquake killed 80,000.

We saw firsthand the staggering challenges of trying to govern a nation of 1.3 billion people. Factories and industrial parks are encroaching on China's scarce and valuable arable land, which potentially could have a major impact on China's ability to feed itself and as a consequence on world food prices. China is struggling to deliver healthcare to all its citizens, particularly in rural areas.

Everyone seems wired. A little over ten years ago, almost no one in China could go online. Today over 400 million people in China use the Internet, almost 800 million people use mobile phones, and tens of millions more users are being added to the rolls each year.

Though our visit took place shortly before the news this spring of migrant workers committing suicide or going on strike demanding better wages, we met rural inhabitants disillusioned with China's regimented factory life and the second-class status of migrant workers in China. They had returned to the countryside to try to make a living there.

We looked at the complicated world of non-governmental organizations in China, which often exist in legal limbo and must navigate a complicated political landscape, a raft of government regulations and relations with local officials.

We also explored the generational change currently underway both in the Chinese leadership and the Chinese workforce. At roundtable with an impressive group of students at Tsinghua University, one of China's top institutions of higher education, we heard about their desire to travel abroad and their interest in the educational and entrepreneurial opportunities the United States offered, but the heavy responsibility they felt, as the first generation of offspring under China's one-child policy, to provide for their aging parents.

And then there were our culinary adventures. The editors sampled Sichuan's famous spicy hot pot, Yunnanese "stinky tofu," frog stew, fried scorpions, dumplings and of course, Peking duck.

China is so vast, so complex, and so old, that we realized even at the end of a very intense two weeks that we had barely scratched the surface. We did, however, gain a great appreciation for the Chinese people and the great many dedicated and talented individuals we met, who, like people everywhere, are searching for a better life.

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