

## 十七

At that time 'round China  
was a big bamboo curtain  
no way to go in then  
that was for certain  
so we stood by a fence  
at the edge of Hong Kong  
watching communists work  
it all seemed so wrong



## Chapter 17 – The Bamboo Curtain

There never was a real “bamboo curtain,” just like there wasn’t a real “iron curtain.” Whereas, most people understood the iron curtain to be the border that divided post WW2 Europe into the “free world” and the “communist world,” the term “bamboo curtain” was used to describe a similar border separating “communist China” from “free Asia.” But the term “bamboo curtain” never really became a part of the popular vernacular during the 1970’s. For Americans wishing to visit China during that era, however, it was every bit as unbreachable a wall. Although Richard Nixon had opened the door to a changing relationship between the two nations in 1972, it wasn’t until 1979 that America set up diplomatic relations with China and American students began trickling into mainland China. I have vivid memories of traveling through Hong Kong in 1979 and taking a train out to the China border with the poet, William Howard Cohen. We rode the train to the end of the line (Lok Ma Chau) to look at “real communists” toiling in the fields below in mainland China from a lookout point at Lok Ma Chau.

We were all pretty ignorant of China during the 1970’s. I well remember traveling to Vancouver, B.C. to buy the English translations of Chinese propaganda magazines, Mao’s Little Red Book (毛主席语录 Máo Zhǔxí Yǔlù), and the White Haired Girl (白毛女 Bái Máo Nǚ) in the early 70’s. I also remember picking up elementary school textbooks in 1974 Taiwan referring to Communist Bandits 共匪 gòngfěi and passages exhorting the imminent “復國 Fùguó” (recovery of the mainland.) It wasn’t just Americans. Actually, most of the world was incredibly ignorant of the People’s Republic of China for the 30 years between 1949-1979. In 2023, Mike Chinoy published *Assignment China: An Oral History of American Journalists in the People’s Republic*. Columbia University Press which describes the frustrations of reporters trying everything to get real information out of China at that, but we only knew what China wanted us to know. We may have heard of the Great Leap Forward, but we were largely unaware of the “Great Famine” (三年大饥荒 Sānnián Sà Jīhuang) from 1959-1961 where upwards of 30 million people starved to death. The Cultural Revolution aka “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” (无产阶级文化大革命 Wúchǎn Jiējí Wénhuà Dà Géming) was romanticized on the campus of UC Berkeley, but it is often thought of now as a “tumultuous ten years” by those who lived through it. The Red Guards (红卫兵 Hóng Wèibīng ) were teens and tweens who believed that “First we will make China Maoist from inside out and then we will help the

working people of other countries make the world red ... and then the whole universe.” Their mission was to “attack the 4 Olds” (old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas.) They worshipped and memorized the sayings of Mao Ze Dong they carried around with them in their “Little Red Book(s).” Communism was always more of a vision than a plan. Still the Red Guards believed that by destroying the old, they would enable the new, and that by relegating university professors to working the fields and having uneducated peasants become their teachers, they would reverse "bourgeois" educational elitism, reinforce Mao Zedong’s ideology, and that China would emerge glorious and victorious.

But it didn’t. The Cultural Revolution failed miserably. The country nearly ground to a halt. But there’s always a scapegoat. In the case of the Cultural Revolution, it was the “Gang of 4.” One of that gang was Mao Ze Dong’s wife, 江青 Jiāng Qīng. She was initially given the death penalty for her role in the Cultural Revolution, but it was later commuted to “life in prison.” She committed suicide in prison in 1991. China would take years to recover and evolve into China’s current “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics.”

Unlike the Iron Curtain which toppled, the Bamboo Curtain opened on its own volition. The USA normalized relations with the People’s Republic of China nearly 30 years after it had established itself as the official government of China. By doing so, America joined the ranks of the majority of countries of the world. The USA and China issued the Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations on January 1, 1979. In it, America agreed that “there is only one China and that Taiwan is a part of China.” China’s one concession to the agreement was that America could continue to carry on an unofficial relationship with Taiwan..

Chinoy, Mike. *Assignment China: An Oral History of American Journalists in the People’s Republic*. Columbia University Press, 2023.



A promotional graphic for an event. It features a portrait of Mike Chinoy on the left. The text reads 'ASSIGNMENT: CHINA' in large letters, with 'Follow the Money' underneath. To the right, it says 'Mike Chinoy', 'Monday, Feb. 15', '6 - 8 P.M.', and 'Darla Moore School of Business - RM123'. The background shows a city skyline.