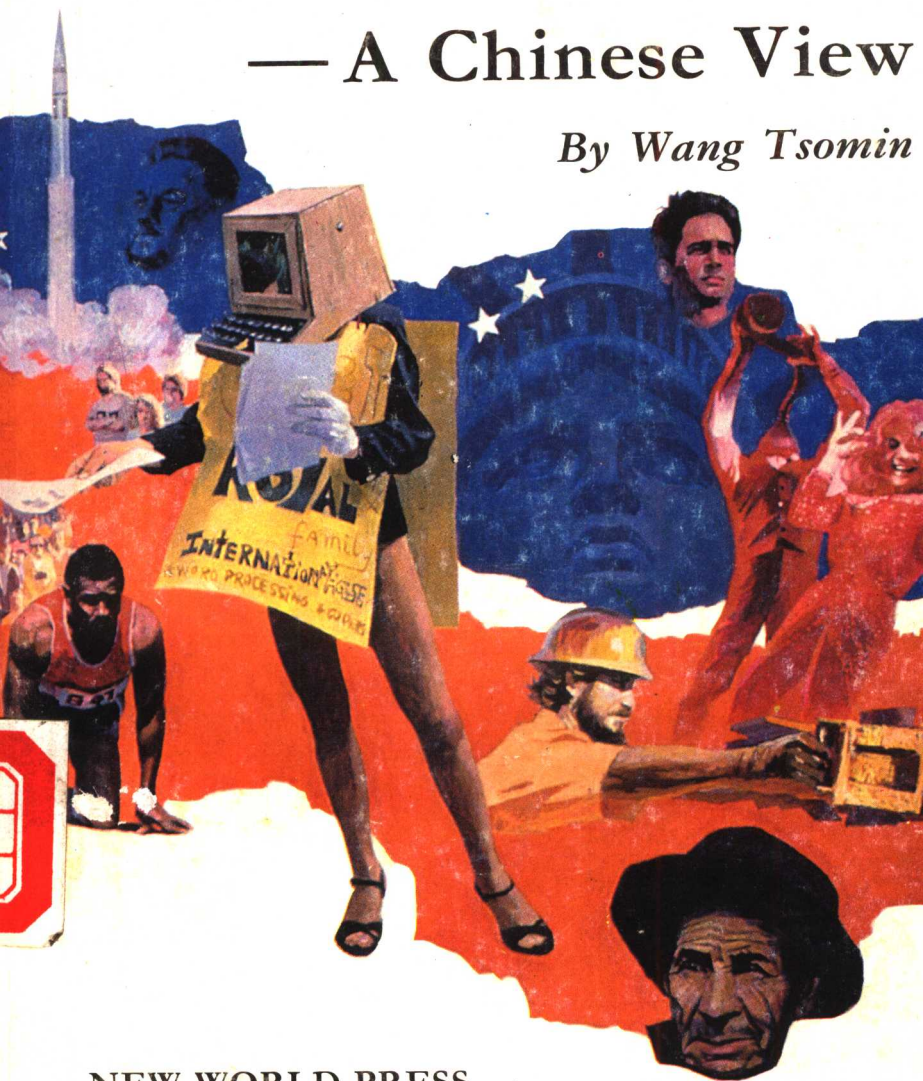


THE AMERICAN KALEIDOSCOPE

— A Chinese View

By Wang Tsomin



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By
WANG TSOMIN

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PREFACE

Since the thawing of Sino-American relations in 1972, people-to-people exchanges between the two countries have been fast increasing. The gratifying growth of mutual contacts has not only increased a popular desire for more knowledge of each other, but also created a hunger for deeper understanding. During the two years I spent in America as the Chinese Ambassador to Washington, I often felt the American eagerness to learn more about China. I will always think of this interest as a clear symbol of friendship. Upon returning to my homeland, I sensed an equally strong desire to know more about America. Apart from the pronounced interest in American science, technology and management, people of all trades and professions want to acquaint themselves with Americans as fellow human beings, not merely as specialists in one field or another. They often ask: How do Americans live and work? What are the salient points of their history and culture? What are their joys and sorrows? What is the American dream?

The average Chinese, I must frankly admit, is less privileged than the average American in being able to seek first hand such mutual understanding. As yet, few Chinese can afford to visit the United States as tourists. Moreover, our media coverage is only approaching technological sophistication, and is not as all-encompassing as we would like it to be. Consequently, though numerous reports are carried in our press on various aspects of American life, many of them tend to be either superficial or academic. A systematic and popular account of the American land and people is badly needed, particularly for the young readers whose interest in the outside world, especially in the United States as a most developed country, is intense.

It is perhaps against this background that Ms. Wang Tsomin's new book, *American Kaleidoscope*, published last October has been warmly

received. Many leading Chinese national dailies and magazines have printed favorable reviews. The first printing was quickly sold out and a second printing had to be rushed to meet the market demand.

I have known Ms. Wang since the 1930s when we both attended Qinghua (Tsinghua) University in Beijing. She is familiar with her subject because she lived in America for a few years in the 1940s, received her journalistic training at the prestigious University of Missouri School of Journalism, and since her return to New China in 1949, has been active in the publishing field as a writer. But I am impressed not so much by her expertise as by her sincerity and earnestness. Reading through the pages one can readily feel that she is indeed trying hard to help the reader know about America and the Americans — by reinforcing her personal impressions with research material, by covering such a wide range of subjects that a young Chinese reviewer overzealously praised the volume as a “mini-encyclopedia,” and by laboriously “leap-frogging,” as she herself puts it, from one place to another for a whole year across the vast American continent. Having interviewed hundreds of people, she brought back voluminous notes, numerous audio-tapes and photographs.

Wang Tsomin has been a candid person since her younger days. She never minces words. I am glad to find that she writes with the same frankness. She freely and easily records what she saw, heard and thought, leaving aside ideological differences because she was, again in her own words, undertaking the project as a private citizen with no official blessings or obligations on either side of the Pacific. She declared that she would “call a spade a spade.”

But America is not all that simple. No observer, for his or her professed objectivity, can completely avoid bias. A foreign writer may even make factual mistakes here and there. So I appreciate Ms. Wang’s modest statement that she is, to quote an old Chinese saying, “peeping at the sky through a bamboo tube and measuring the sea with a gourd,” (*gungui lice*). American society is too complex. Few, if any, can claim to know it all. Even Alexis Tocqueville did not proclaim himself to be an authority. Nonetheless, I see in *American Kaleidoscope* a welcome effort in the right direction. And I hope that the volume will be followed by more works of this kind, popular or scholarly, general or specialized, to enhance Chinese understanding of America. Such an

understanding, I believe, is a key element for peace and development — the two paramount issues of our times.

It would be ludicrous to presume that American readers would read this book to learn about their own country. None of them, for instance, needs to be enlightened about the Boston Tea Party, though the author understandably has to explain to her Chinese reader that the Tea Party was not a social gathering, but a revolutionary landmark. However, some Americans may find the book interesting because most people seem to be fond of looking at a mirror and are curious as to what others are saying about them. I think those working for friendship between Americans and Chinese will find the book a useful reflection of their own noble endeavor. And I believe that they, too, will not mince their words if they find any inaccuracy or misrepresentation in the volume. The author says emphatically that she is ready to revise it if there is to be a new edition.

May more Chinese and Americans join in the effort to make “the east meet the west” not only in business but also in mind!

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Zhang Wenjin' in a cursive, flowing style.

(ZHANG WENJIN)

Former Chinese Ambassador to the United States;

President of Chinese People's Friendship Association with Foreign Countries

Beijing, July, 1986

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FOREWORD

An unexpected chance has enabled me to live and travel extensively in the United States for one year. The purpose is for me to gather impressions and materials for a book on contemporary America.

The writing project had its inception in late 1979. At that time, a delegation of Chinese economists headed by Mr. Ma Hong (who later became president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) was touring the United States as guests of five prestigious American universities with business management schools — the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Harvard, Stanford, Pennsylvania, and Indiana. The delegation's American hosts suggested writing such a book for a Chinese audience. The proposal, coming at a time when China and the United States had established diplomatic relations after an estrangement of thirty years and were seeking to understand each other, was timely and worthy.

After eighteen months of preparation, a time devoted mainly to fund-raising, M.I.T. Professor Richard D. Robinson wrote Mr. Ma to say that a Chinese writer could be sent and that "what we envision is not a dull scholarly analysis, but rather a lively, semi-popular account of life in the United States as seen by the writer. Naturally he/she will be free to write whatever seems appropriate." The professor had been entrusted by M.I.T. President, Paul E. Gray, to manage the project. Though the letter of formal invitation was signed by President Gray, it was Professor Robinson who took meticulous care of the project from beginning to end.

Probably because the hosts had made it clear that they wanted an informal, not an academic work, the Chinese Academy turned to my publishing organization to look for a journalist to do the job. I was offered the assignment.

The United States was where I had studied in the 1940s (in the School of Journalism, University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri). Naturally I was interested in making a second visit to see what changes had taken place in the intervening years. But the job of writing a book on such a vast and complex country made me hesitant.

I consulted senior scholars and journalists as well as my friends. They all thought it was a worthwhile, though arduous, undertaking. They suggested that such a book should cater primarily to a young readership. As China was shifting to a policy of opening up to the outside world, its hundreds of millions of youth were becoming increasingly interested in other countries, particularly the United States. In addition to personal observations, they advised, the book should provide some elementary knowledge of that country, its land and people, its past and present.

The basic approach to be stressed was *shi shi qiu shi* (seeking truth from facts), a tradition undergoing vigorous revival in China after the "cultural revolution" of 1966-1976. During those ten years of turmoil, many basic facts about life were ignored in the midst of ultra-revolutionary rhetoric. People were made to believe, among other things, that there was nothing good whatsoever in Western capitalist society. But then the axiom *shi shi qiu shi* was re-emphasised. When applied to writing, it simply means "calling a spade a spade" or reporting the facts without tarnishing or garnishing. It was also my conviction that only in this way could the book promote genuine understanding and friendship between the Chinese and American peoples.

I then canvassed prospective young readers for suggestions. Having lived behind closed doors for so many years, the youngsters were knowledge thirsty. They said they wanted to know about American history, geography, and all aspects of contemporary life. Their numerous questions ranged from why the United States was nicknamed "Uncle Sam"—the sullen-faced old gentleman they had often seen in caustic newspaper cartoons—to an inquiry on the meaning of the stars and stripes on the American flag. In short, they wanted to know something about everything—an almost impossible job for me!

Nonetheless, their enthusiasm inspired me. It was with their

encouragement and the heartening calls from my colleagues and friends that I accepted the assignment and ventured out on the journey, all alone and as a private citizen, without official blessing and without official obligation to either China or the United States.

The tour lasted from May 1982 to May 1983. For technical reasons the publishing of the book is a bit belated. But I am attempting to create impressionistic images of American society and the people I have seen rather than to delineate time-sensitive subjects. Hence the book.

Remarks for the English Edition

Professor Robinson and other American friends have expressed interest in seeing an English-language edition of the book and believe that the American reading public might like to know how a Chinese views their society. Consequently, the present volume is a translation of the Chinese-language edition published by the Social Sciences Publishing House, Beijing, under the title *American Kaleidoscope: Society, Landscape, and People*. Some minor textual changes have been made in the course of translation with the aim of adding explanations of things Chinese to which I referred. I am surprised, for instance, by the high rents in America. Why? Because most Chinese urban dwellers live in apartments heavily subsidized by the government. A brief account of the Chinese housing system will help foreign readers appreciate my reaction and at the same time give them a glimpse of one facet of Chinese life. Such an explanation, obviously, is unnecessary in the Chinese edition. The Chinese "cultural revolution," often mentioned in the text, also needs some elaboration in the English edition. It would be quite superfluous for Chinese readers. In short, I often "measure American corn with a Chinese bushel." A few words about the "Chinese bushel" seem in order so that my comments are more easily comprehended.

For American readers, I wish to add that while I was doing research and then writing this book I tried to keep in mind the idyllic portrayals of China created by some American writers, as well as the muckraking volumes written by others. Neither the sunny side nor the

seamy side alone is the true China. The same may be said of America. While conclusions derived from the same observations can naturally differ from author to author, I have conscientiously tried to avoid one-sided distortions.

Acknowledgments

I wish to express my warm appreciation for the generous assistance given by many American friends during my travels. I also must acknowledge the cooperation of my husband, Mr. Duan Liancheng, who edited my Chinese manuscripts and later translated the whole book into English — not simply out of a desire to help me, but with a shared sense of dedication to the friendship of the American and Chinese peoples. He was a classmate of mine at the University of Missouri and, as former director of the Beijing-based Foreign Languages Publication and Distribution Bureau, remains actively interested in publishing for international understanding. In addition, credit goes to Chen Xiuzheng, Deputy Chief Editor, Zhang Xiaojiang, Deputy Executive Editor, and Zhu Penghe of the New World Press; they helped to bring the English edition to light. Last but not least, I thank Frances Chastain and Brian George, American editors working with that publishing house in Beijing. They have carefully revised the English translation.

Wang Tsomin

Beijing, China
April 1986