Today's China: Appearance Is Everything

by Andrea Worden '82

After graduating from Yale in December, 1986, Andrea Worden went to China to teach English under the auspices of the Yale-China Association. She first taught in Tianjin, a city near Beijing, at the Tianjin Economic Management Cadre Institute, then moved south to Changsha and Hunan Medical College, where she has just completed the first year of a two-year assignment. This year she taught oral English to first-year medical students and doctors.

One of my students used to be a professional basketball player. The first time I saw her, I guessed that she was an athlete; taller than most of the men in the classroom, she walked with a hint of what must once have been a well-developed strut.

Lisa played basketball for the Hunan provincial team for nine years, beginning when she was fifteen. After her "retirement" in 1974, she entered Hunan Medical College (HMC) where she is now a surgeon. Fortunately for Lisa, those nine years of playing basketball fell during the Cultural Revolution — 1966 to 1976. While a virtual civil war was being fought at HMC between hostile factions of Red Guards, and teachers (branded as "stinking intellectuals") were being locked up in classrooms-turned-prisons, Lisa was working on her lefthand hook shot.

But no one could completely escape the Maoist fervor of the Cultural Revolution. One night, a few months ago, she showed me some photographs from her basketball years. There were several of the Hunan team, with different foreign opponents, posed in front of Mao's birthplace in Shoshan, a village near Changsha.

"When a foreign team visited Changsha, we had to go to Mao's home; it was an order," she explained.

Another photograph showed the Hunan players with the Albanian team in the Changsha gym. A long banner hung from the ceiling. I read it aloud, slowly, character by character. It said: "Overthrow the American aggressors and all of their running dogs."

Lisa laughed, and, holding up the photograph, said: "This is history."

Today, the banner is gone. In its place hang strings of lights for the dance held nightly in the gym. (During the Cultural Revolution the only dance that was permitted was the "Dance of Loyalty" to Mao.) A huge portrait of Mao lies on its side at the top of the bleachers, neglected. And I, an "American aggressor," play basketball with the Hunan team.

Most of the players were born in the late 1960's, the heyday of the Cultural Revolution. Their names reveal how seriously revolutionary zeal was taken at the time — at center is For the People Gao, Vanguard Xu plays strong forward, and Red Rong shines as shooting guard. While their counterparts ten years ago might have talked about the class struggle and the latest political slogans, the most common topics of conversation at today's practice are money (how to get more of it), Michael Jackson, and breakdancing!

Andrea teaching one of her English classes at Hunan Medical College. She and her students are "bundled up because there is not heat in the building."

The first day of practice I thought about my NCS basketball coach and muttered to myself over and over again: "Kay Kreher would die!" The players laughed and joked through drills; those who were waiting their turn practiced the waltz and rhumba on the sidelines; others sat down, complaining about various aches and pains. I wondered why the coach had so little control over his unmotivated players.

Later, I discovered that athletes, like most working people in China, hold guaranteed jobs. The coach can't fire them and they're not allowed to quit. Recruited at the age of twelve or thirteen for their general athletic ability, they were trained to be basketball players. Many had never touched a basketball before their first day of practice. At first, playing professional basketball was appealing; good pay, good benefits, and an opportunity to travel make an offer to play professional sports difficult for the teenager and her parents

A group of first year medical students celebrated Women's Day — March 8 — on an outing. Since Chinese go to medical school directly from high school, these women are relatively young, around 18 years old.

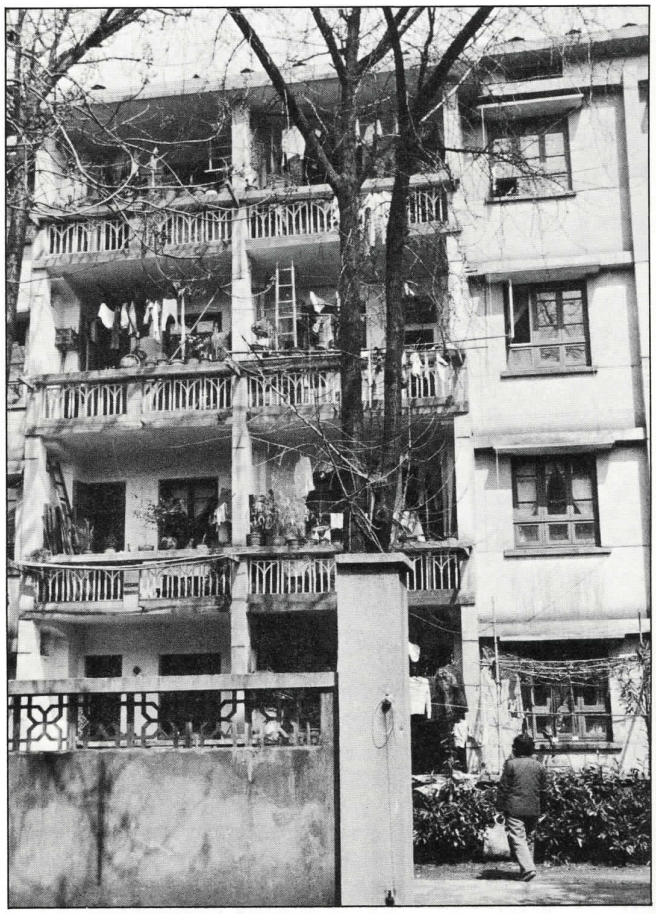
to turn down. But now, having played for seven or eight years, they're bored. One teammate confided that, given a choice, not one of them would still be playing basketball. This scenario — unhappy workers putting very little effort into jobs they would rather quit — is, despite the much touted economic reforms, disturbingly common to China.

One day, not long after I had begun working out with the team, a group of bureaucrats came to watch practice. During warm-up drills, one of the assistant coaches pulled me aside and asked, very politely, if she could borrow my sneakers. She then handed my Nikes over to the visitors, who turned out to be leaders of the factory that makes the team's basketball shoes. I watched as they tried them on, took notes, and drew sketches, wondering whether the people from Nike could sue me if they found out.

This urgent desire for things Western has led to large scale copying, which, more often than not, is executed with little grasp of the concepts or the series of operations which went into creating the finished product. For example, there's a sense in China that only if a place has a Western-style luxury hotel can it then be counted among China's developed cities. Too often, however, inside the hotel the efficiency and professionalism one would expect, given the building's external appearance, is completely absent. Maybe the elevator breaks down and no one knows how to repair it, or the dining room offers only three of the twenty selections listed on the menu. Similarly, the future sneakers of the Hunan women's basketball team will look like Nikes, but will probably not function like them.

The difference between the China of the Cultural Revolution and China today is striking. The current policies of opening up to the West, the "deMaoization," the prevalent desire to "get rich quick" all run counter to the trends of the past few decades. But a deceptively large part of this change is superficial. Underneath lies a centuries-old cultural tradition, which, with its emphasis on stability, moderation, and strict conformity, militates against progressive change. Combine this conservative tradition with the myriad problems facing China today — overpopulation, corruption, serious inflation, to name a few — and the result is the realization that it will take nothing less than a fundamental restructuring — economically, politically, even culturally — before China can truly become a developed nation.

In a country where substance is elusive and appearance is everything, many people are cynical and pessimistic. Lisa has just left China to study in England. Like many other Chinese living abroad, she is considering not going back. The word that she and others have used to explain the state of affairs in China today is "chaos." Perhaps the greatest problem facing China is the one that its leaders are least willing to acknowledge: its young people lack confidence in their country's future.



Apartments at Hunan Medical College. Most of the teachers, doctors, and staff live on campus. Housing is a serious problem in urban China — not enough space for too many people. Recently married couples often can't get their own housing, so must live with one set of parents, usually in very crowded quarters. There's one plus, though — housing is essentially free.