

"It's so simple . . . first you start exchanging musk oxen for giant pandas, then you start exchanging people."

The Peking visit: What does it mean for science?



Basset, Washington Daily News

The prolonged isolation of scientists in the People's Republic of China has been extremely frustrating to their counterparts in the outside world. Last spring's table tennis invitations were encouraging to many U.S. scientists, who foresaw a thaw in political relations that might ultimately lead to free scientific exchanges (SN: 5/8/71, p. 313). There has, in fact, been definite improvement and some U.S. scientists have actually visited China, but a real breakthrough has been slow in coming.

Now, once again, encouragement has come in the form of President Nixon's trip to China last week and the resulting communique in which possible exchanges of scientists were mentioned in passing. U.S. scientists are unsure about what might develop, but once again, cautious optimism has arisen.

The wording of the communique was vague: "The two sides agreed that it is desirable to broaden the understanding between the two peoples. To this end, they discussed specific areas in such fields as science, technology, culture, sports and journalism, in which people-to-people contacts and exchanges would be mutually beneficial. Each side undertakes to facilitate the future development of such contacts and exchanges."

As of midweek, the President had offered no elaboration of how extensive such exchanges might be or what procedures might be involved. The President's science adviser, Edward E. David Jr., called the agreement an important step, but was making no statements beyond that. The general tendency among China-watchers was to bide their time until a clearer statement is issued.

Meanwhile, a number of groups have been quietly working by means of their own to improve relations with China's scientific community. The National Academy of Sciences' Committee on

Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China has been corresponding with U.S. scholars, and will soon publish a fact book on the current status of scientific communication with China that will also tell how U.S. scientists should go about contacting Chinese scientists.

The National Committee on U.S.-China relations, a New York-based group supported by the Ford Foundation and Rockefeller Brothers Fund, is planning, with the NAS, a series of workshops for U.S. scientists and physicians. The workshops will deal with China in general and scientific developments in China in particular. A spokesman for the committee said they do not know yet what the results of Nixon's trip will be and, if exchanges of scientists do develop, what role the committee would play.

The Federation of American Scientists has a China contacts committee chaired by Arthur Galston, a Yale University biologist. His group is likewise biding time awaiting developments from the President's trip. At present, Galston says, "We can't even guess what the significance of the President's trip will be." They will have to wait, he says, to see what Nixon meant in his communique. In response to attempts at communication, the Federation received a letter last August from the Chinese academy of sciences to the effect that the Chinese would be happy to have the Federation's recommendations of U.S. scientists to visit China. They have made some recommendations, says Galston, but a very small number have actually been admitted—about half a dozen. No Chinese have visited the United States "as scientists," he says.

Galston himself visited China nine months ago and has just received approval for another visit. This visit will be for two months, and Galston will

be taking his family along. Though the itinerary of the trip has not been settled, Galston hopes to be able to do some actual research in China. He'd like to do work both in one of their laboratories and in one of their practical production units. Chinese scientists are required to do both types of work, and Galston would like to see how this arrangement has affected science and how it has affected the practical work. "This would be an interesting area of difference to explore." To date, visiting U.S. scientists have had the status of tourists or observers.

The Federation, of course, is only one of several groups promoting China visits by U.S. scientists. The Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, for example, last year arranged for a group of U.S. scholars to visit China and is planning to send another group next week. In addition, some scientists have gone on their own. No one seems to know exactly how many U.S. scientists have visited China; one estimate was "under 25."

Nobel laureate George Wald of Harvard University has just returned from a month's visit to China. He has the impression that the number of visitors to China will be strictly limited for some time to come by the practical problems of handling large numbers of tourists, as well as by political concerns, with U.S. scientists who are inclined to be sympathetic or open-minded receiving preference.

The relatively few contacts that have been made have merely whetted the interest of U.S. scientists. The number of scientists clamoring to get in must far exceed China's ability to handle them. As a spokesman for the Federation of American Scientists remarked, the Chinese probably receive so many applications for visits that it's hard for them to resolve the problem. □