A fascinating snapshot of the ‘other’ China, whose citizens, in fits and starts, are adapting to ‘capitalism with Chinese characteristics’.

‘It is said that in America, the money is in the pockets of the Jews and the brains are in the heads of the Chinese,’ a local official in Guizhou province tells Michael Levy, a Peace Corps volunteer.

Before long, the man adds, America will fade away and China “will have one hundred years of glory. When the Jews begin to immigrate here, we will know we have won!” Levy nods, rests his head on a table, and falls asleep. It is not his first – nor will it be his last – awkward conversation about Jews, Judaism and the United States.

In Kosher Chinese, Levy, who currently teaches at St. Ann’s School in Brooklyn, New York, recounts his experiences in 2005 and 2006 teaching English as a second language at Gui Da University in rural China. Up-close-and-personal, funny and, alas, occasionally sophomoric (and potty-obsessed), Levy’s memoir provides a fascinating snapshot of the “other” China – rarely covered by the American media – whose citizens, in fits and starts, are adapting to “capitalism with Chinese characteristics.”

The students’ attitude toward the US, Levy indicates, serves as a surrogate for their ambivalence about change. They are taught that despite achievements in science and technology, Americans “cannot find any reason to live other than money or false religion,” and suffer from a profound malaise.

“Do you believe this?” Levy asks.

“I must learn it,” one of his best students replies.

The larger of two Wal-Marts in the city, Levy points out, is a 40,000-foot warehouse adjacent to the People’s Park and a statue of Chairman Mao. The statue is too big, a student who takes the name Jennifer confesses: “Wal-Mart is the future,” and “to be honest, I hate Chairman Mao. Can he find me a husband? A better job? Of course not.”

And yet, the young people of Guizhou also know they have lost “the iron rice bowl” – the iron-clad guarantee from the Communist Party (delivered through the work unit, or danwei) – of housing, food, schooling, child care and health care. Without this cradle-to-grave security, and without religion, tradition and even the prospect of parenthood (because of the One Child Policy), many of them feel anxious, even about mobility and freedom.
“I am drifting,” Vivian tells Levy. “All of China is drifting.” Drawn to her teacher’s descriptions (at meetings of the Guizhou University Jewish Friday Night English and Cooking Corner Club) of halla, kibbutzim, Shabbat prayers over wine, and Woody Allen movies, Vivian does not accept professional status and money as guiding principles. These pursuits, Levy writes, strike many locals “the way a career in jazz dance would strike the average Kansan. What was the point, and who were the role models?” In Guizhou, Levy observes, guanxi (connections) are the only currency that matters. At the university’s Spring Festival English Singing Contest, the judges give the highest overall score to Big Twin, who sings “My Heart Will Go On,” the blockbuster hit from the movie Titanic. But the contestant who walks away with the first prize, a bouquet of flowers, a standing ovation and 100 bucks, for his rendition of “Unchained Melody,” is a young man with an odd name. Festival, Levy learns, is the nephew of the president of Gui Da.

Little wonder, then, that many students are cynical about elections for the People’s Congress in Beijing – and the requirement, enforced by class monitors, that all of them cast ballots.

“Democracy is too chaotic,” one of them opines. “We should just listen to the leaders.”

“We vote,” says another, “and the teachers choose. This is just for fun.”

An all too typical example of “Democracy with Chinese Characteristics,” this “contest,” Levy concludes, is not the place to make his last stand as an American Peace Corps volunteer.

Levy returned to China in 2010, teaching English to wealthy teenagers preparing to attend boarding school in the US in an air-conditioned, Wi-Fi ready classroom.

“Exploding with vitality, money, and ambition,” Beijing, he notes, “knew what kind of punch it packed.” Along with Shanghai, of course, it provides the frame through which Western pundits view China.

In Guizhou, he writes, “the propaganda had changed,” fewer public buildings are adorned with photographs of Marx and Mao, and it seems realistic for exceptionally talented youngsters to believe that they could study in elite universities. However, the houses in the province remain dilapidated, and the streets are still strewn with excrement.

Levy does not pretend to be an expert on China. He does not comment on China’s shrinking workforce, rapidly aging population, ethnic unrest, and hierarchical corporate structures. But he intuits (and given these factors, he may well be right) that the economic boom may not reach tens and perhaps hundreds of millions of Chinese living in the hinterlands in the near future, if ever.

Nor is it likely, we might add, that massive numbers of Jews will emigrate to China any time soon, inaugurating “one hundred years of glory.”

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