

Professor sees changes on return trip to China

By Brad Gifford
Daily Nebraskan Staff Writer

The People's Republic of China's standard of living and economy have reached new highs, thanks to a bold experiment by its government, according to a UNL agronomy professor.

Virgil Johnson, also leader of wheat research for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, returned this summer from his second trip to China. On his first trip to China in 1976 he tried to persuade its leaders to join the International Winter Wheat Performance Nursery, a worldwide network ran by the USDA and the UNL department of agronomy.

Wheat from the more than 50 participating countries is routed through Lincoln to test plots in Arizona, where it is grown, harvested and returned to UNL for analysis. When a sufficient amount of seed has been harvested from the test plots, it is sent back to the corresponding countries which record yields for further study at UNL.

China joined the IWWPN two years ago, and Johnson returned to the country this summer to help Chinese scientists with the initial stages of the project.

Johnson said he noticed dramatic changes both in agriculture and in the people since his first trip.

China has set wheat production records during the last two years, Johnson said, and crop predictions look good in 1984.

The increased yields were the result of keeping the fields in production all year by planting two or three crops, one after the other and a more effective and efficient use of fertilizers, Johnson said.

Although Johnson said he expected higher yields than those in 1976, he was surprised by the dramatic size of the jump and astonished by the transformation in the Chinese people.

"I wasn't prepared for the extent of the change," he said.

The Cultural Revolution, which began as China started opening up to the West, has left its mark on everything, Johnson said. In 1976 the revolution still was alive, as was Mao Tse-Tung. Changes were just beginning.

"In 1976, few people were willing to talk openly with me," he said. "Most of what we heard in groups was what the Chinese perceived as 'safe' rhetoric.

"But when I went back this time, I heard many people — not only individually, but in groups — talk freely about what had happened in China," Johnson said. "They were relatively at ease talking about some of the short comings of the Cultural Revolution."

The collapse of the university system in China was one of the shortcomings Johnson was told about. In 1976, the university system was "virtually dismantled," he said. Most professors had been relegated to the countryside to perform menial labor as the revolution stressed a back-to-basics philosophy.

On his second trip, hearing the Chinese talk even slightly critically about the past was very different, he said.

Johnson attributes most of the differences he saw to the Chinese government's new attitude of flexibility.

"The Chinese have taken socialism and modified it to the extent that it's working for them much better than it has ever worked in the Soviet Union," he said. Johnson has visited every Eastern Bloc country except Albania.

According to Johnson, Chinese officials have been flexible enough to allow a small degree of capitalism.

"They realize that there has to be incentives if there's going to be high production."

Communes, prevalent in 1976, largely have been dismantled, Johnson said, and thousands of small, private shops have sprung up in the cities. Johnson said Yugoslavia and Hungary were using similar systems.

Unlike those countries, however, China must provide for a people who constitute about one-fourth of the world's population. Food shortages have plagued China in the past, Johnson said, but the government now thinks increased production is worth the risk of giving the people a taste of free enterprise.

"What they are doing now seems to be an experiment that may be a very dangerous one if it's allowed to get out of hand."

Although he said the government appears to be in control, if the changes are too drastic and occur too quickly, government control could be threatened.

"When you've got a 1,200,000,000 population, control is a very tenuous kind of thing," he said.

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