

Chinese job-seekers: to escape or rebel

by Cho Wen-pin

Five hundred and one years ago, Columbus failed to find a China that, in those days, was rich—but the International Monetary Fund (IMF) found it in May. What the IMF found, as stated in its recent annual report, was that the economic reforms in China had lifted the country to become the third economic power in the world, next to the United States and Japan.

But while the IMF is bragging about its discovery, bad news is coming out from this financiers' "brave new world." On June 1, China's currency collapsed about 25% in Shanghai's foreign exchange swap center, and on the next day, the drop swept the other major centers of Guangzhou, Beijing, and Shengzhen. In May, Chinese police suppressed hundreds of demonstrators in Tibet, and early in June, 15,000 unpaid farmers took to the streets in Sichuan province, historically known as a rich rice land. The picture is even more dramatic if one looks at the thousands of illegal aliens from Chinese coastal areas being smuggled into New York City every month, looking for jobs paying as little as 50¢ an hour.

These illegal immigrants start their journey by paying or, mostly, incurring debts of up to \$40,000 to come to the United States to work in New York's underground economy. They refuse to go back to the communist nightmare, even though their American Dream has burst like a bubble.

The coming repeat of Tiananmen Square

For the past 44 years China's economy has been wrecked by the communist regime. The objective of Deng's pragmatic reform, started 15 years ago, was to double China's living standard by the end of this century. Yet what has doubled are the unemployment and crime rates: Some corrupted local Communist Party (CP) officials have been murdered by angry workers and farmers who lost their jobs. Two weeks ago, the largest bribery case was cracked in Guangdong, in which the vice general manager of an engineering consultancy was suspected of accepting more than \$1 million from overseas investors. This relates to an earlier story in which a woman committed suicide in a village pond to protest the brutal tax collection policy. In Guangdong, the fertile soil of the Pearl River Delta is rapidly being lost due to land speculation. "In the past," one peasant said, "communist cadres distributed the landlords' land to us. Now they take it away for their own profit. How can we make a living without land?" According

to *China Focus*, CP cadres skimmed off 70% of the land value from the buyers, leaving only 30% for the peasants.

Economic injustice and official corruption had ignited the Democracy Movement in 1989. Four years later, Beijing's policy is creating a job-seeking army more than 100 million strong. Many walk up and down along the railway daily, and they seem to link the two destinies: to escape abroad or "to take arms against a sea of troubles, And by opposing end them" (*Hamlet*, III, i, 56).

For those who chose to fight since the bloody suppression on June 4, 1989, they fight underground. Overseas Chinese democratic alliance and human rights organizations report that thousands of political organizations have mushroomed inside China.

Those who run away from China are called "man-snakes" in Chinese. These desperate workers and peasants are smuggled by the gangs, or the "snakeheads." Yet, there is reason to believe that the biggest snakehead sits in Beijing, using this "ultimate weapon" of human flesh, i.e., the huge labor surplus that could flood Asia and the Pacific, to threaten Taiwan, Japan, Australia, the United States, and Canada. A desperate emperor uses any weapon to defend the crown.

This year so far, besides those who disappeared into the underground of the Chinatowns, the United States has detained about 2,000 illegal Chinese newcomers; last year the number was 613, and in 1991 only 20 were arrested. According to *Asian World Journal*, they came on the old ships bought from Taiwan fishermen by organized criminals. Those boats became obsolete when the environmentalists succeeded in outlawing drag-net fishing. Although they were designed with toilets for 8-10 people, the boats are now packed with up to 100 men and women.

The boat people keep on coming—to a nightmarish life, but they write home to describe the opportunities in the New World. Americans impressed by the IMF's report and Beijing Taoists' "Tao Jones" propaganda, seem puzzled by this "face-saving" behavior. But in true centuries-old tradition, one would never leave home, unless there was no other way out. The immigrants' ancestors, the men who built America's great transcontinental railroads, were also forced from their homes, which in the last century were being destroyed by the Opium Wars waged by Britain against China. Today their fate is no better.

Recently, the tragedies of those who escape have appeared in western newspapers. The *New York Post* had a story about a violinist who was not able to pay the debt. He ended up in the hospital, his fingers shot off by the debt collectors. In May in New Jersey, two lives were taken to liquidate the unpaid debt.

"It is modern-day slave-trade," said Joann Lum, program director of the Chinese Staff and Workers' Association. Indeed, this is painful, but it is their only alternative, amid 100 million unemployed Chinese, if Beijing continues to impose foolish economic policies and backs it up with military force.