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By Kenneth Pomeranz

A short trip to China earlier this month took me to Beijing to give a talk, to Shijiazhuang for a conference, and, briefly, to the Hebei countryside — my first time in quite a while in rural North China. And it once again proved that every trip teaches you something, but often not on the expected topics. (One little detail that I found telling: most of the Beijing-based academics who were at the Shijiazhuang conference told me it was their first time there. True, Shijiazhuang is not a tourist hot spot, but it is a provincial capital, with over 2 million people in the city, and it's barely 2 hours away by fast train.)

One of the talks I was giving was on environmental history, and I've become more or less obsessed by North China's water shortages — so naturally I arrived in the middle of summer rains with everything looking green. That doesn't mean the water problems aren't real, of course, but this time around I didn't learn much about them. (There was a desperate shortage of life-giving fluid — I went without coffee for two and a half days — but that's another matter.) On the other hand, I learned an awful lot when our hosts in Shijiazhuang took us to a place that I hadn't expected to find all that interesting: Xibaipo.

Xibaipo, in Southwestern Hebei along the edge of the Taihang Mountains, was part of one of the CCP's 19 base areas during the war against Japan; it became the party's principal headquarters after a Nationalist offensive drove them out of Yen'an in 1947, remaining so until March of 1949. (Mao arrived in May of 1948.) It was the site of the key national conference on land reform, and the place from which some of the Civil War's decisive battles were planned. It was opened as a museum in 1978, and if I heard correctly, it has logged 240 million visitors since then. (Very few of them are foreigners, according to our guide, and I saw no other obvious foreigners during our visit.) Americans can think of it as a sort of cross between Valley Forge and Independence Hall, or what such a place might be if it were plunked down in Appalachia — Pingshan is on the Chinese government's official list of poverty-stricken counties.



Xinhua office

Much of the site is taken up by reconstructions of the homes and offices of major CCP leaders who were here: Mao, Zhu De, Zhou Enlai, Dong Biwu, and others. (The originals were destroyed as part of a dam-building project — OK, you knew I'd get water issues in there somehow.) Jiang Qing's room is also clearly marked, but was locked during my visit. All of these are quite Spartan — simple beds *orkangs*, chairs, and desks, and very little decoration besides a photo of the couple in each residence and some maps, which did not look nearly detailed enough to plot any campaigns on, in the military headquarters. Many also featured some very simple tool suggesting participation in manual labor: a spinning wheel near the bed, a grinding stone in the courtyard. (I have no way of knowing how closely this corresponds to what the place looked like in 1948.) The photos — some probably wedding pictures, some not — are among the most interesting details. Most show the couple standing or sitting close enough that one can't be sure whether they are touching, both looking straight ahead, only the woman smiling. One wonders whether this is coincidence, or whether, like so many aspects of CCP family and gender policy in these years, they were carefully calibrated compromises between the urban, May 4th heritage of so many CCP leaders and the much more conservative values (at least as the leadership saw it) of their peasant base. The explanations that were provided — both by signs and by our guide, a local middle school student — were generally matter-of-fact. The crowds that filed through were pretty quiet and serious: I saw no expressions of great revolutionary fervor, but I didn't hear any jokes, either, and one of the most popular places to take a photo of oneself seemed to be by the plaque that had the pledge recited by people joining the Party.



Portrait of a CCP couple at Xibaipo

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