

A glimpse behind the bamboo curtain

COMMUNISM had produced "great achievements as well as great setbacks and mistakes" in China, according to a visiting academic, Prof Ge Ji.

Prof Ji, who visited South Africa in March and is a founder member of the Institute of West Asian and African Studies (Iwaas) in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, has been researching African affairs for 30 years since Mao Tse Tung ordered the establishment of the institute in 1961.

Offering a brief history of China at a gathering in Cape Town, she said communism in China differed substantially from the nature of the system forced on East European countries after World War 2. The Chinese people had "chosen" communism in 1949, she said.

Herself a victim of the notorious "cultural revolution", Prof Ji was forced to move with her husband and two children to a small rural community in the early 1960s, to "learn from the peasants". It was only China's burgeoning contact with post colonial African states - and the need for academic expertise in that field - that hastened her recall to Beijing. She then continued her work as an academic specialising in British Commonwealth affairs and African development.

Although critical of the excesses of the "Gang of Four" who succeeded Mao, Prof Ji staunchly defended the achievements of the People's Republic



Prof Ge Ji: China "more or less" a just society.

of China over the last 41 years.

"If you compare the old world and the new world - China is now politically strong enough to stand up among the nations of the world." Referring to eight years of Japanese occupation before World War 2 and America's "open door" policy imposed on China throughout the 19th century, Prof Ji said: "No one dare invade us again; even the Americans have to respect us now."

ASKED about current world political trends which dismissed communism, Prof Ji was strongly supportive and defensive of what Chinese communism had

achieved. Although the overall standard of living in China was low, she said there had been vast improvements under the Communist government since 1949.

"We are a more or less a just society. The gap between the highest and lowest pay is not that great. I as a director of Iwaas earn about double that of someone who sweeps our offices."

The present Chinese government was pursuing far more contact with the West because it needed the technological and managerial expertise those countries could offer. While admitting that central planning could not plan for every aspect of the

economy, Prof Ji said that on the whole, China could meet its own needs and that was why most Chinese still supported their communist government.

FARMING techniques had ensured that although China occupied only 16 percent of the globe's arable land, it fed its 1,1 billion citizens - 22 percent of the world's population.

Since 1978 China had made "great progress", said Prof Ji. "If you force through central planning against the law of development, you will meet great setbacks." Accordingly, there was a growing small business sector which was encouraged to take initiative and develop independently from state interference.

Asked about China's efforts to control its population growth, Prof Ji said improved medical care had increased the life expectancy of Chinese people from that of 25 years of age in 1949, to 65 years in 1990.

In the old days families had produced eight or nine children and only one or two had survived. As a result of the changes from 1949, more and more children were surviving into adulthood, producing a vast and rapid population growth.

ABORTION is available on demand and strict family planning is advocated by all state institutions.

"In old China thousands died from hunger; is this less inhuman than allowing abortions?" she asked. "We must have strict family planning otherwise we cannot feed our population. The slogan today is, 'one couple one child'."

As an incentive, all first born children in China have free medical care and a government subsidy is given to the parents. However, should the parents have a second child, they must pay the medical costs themselves. Couples who choose not to have children also receive a government grant for added old age security.

Canadians pledge support

YOUTH involvement in violence and the overwhelming impoverishment of the Winterveldt area were two of the issues that most concerned a top fact-finding delegation from Canada which recently visited the country.

Idasa's Pretoria office, which has extensive experience in rural interaction, was requested to set up meetings in Soshanguve and Winterveldt for an Oxfam delegation from Canada.

The group included former members of parliament, an ex-mayor of Ottawa, a political scholar commentator and a mandated representative of the

United Church of Canada and the Inter-Church Coalition on Africa.

Their visit to South Africa focused on the current violence, negotiation for change and establishing the needs of poor South Africans and grassroots groups.

Their experiences here will be used to encourage Canadians to support the social and developmental needs of South Africans and help mitigate the violence. □

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