

Déjà vu – Revelations from a Revolution

“One in six living in the city became one in two..... the country became known as the workshop of the world...it was helped too by easy access to the sea, political stability and light regulation of trade, finance and industry. It also developed a highly skilled workforce, speeding up the development of new products and processes....One aspect of factory life was universally hated by the workforce.....considerations of productivity and safety led employers to regulate all aspects of life in the factory....Overcrowding....in the much-polluted new towns brought ill-health....yet a new mass urban society was born.....quite good at enjoying themselves”.

Shanghai is already bursting at its seams, with the density of people rising to over 42,000 people per square kilometre, which is more than four times that of New York City. Satellite cities are budding all around Shanghai. The region is straining against ecological limits. Over the coming thirty years more than 400 million people will move from the country sides to the cities. Factories are being built in record speeds rivalling the pyramid building enthusiasm of the Egyptians. The workers moving from country sides live and work in factories that are highly regulated for productivity. The ‘world’s factory’ is facing the extremes of environmental and social issues.

You may be somewhat surprised that while excerpts from the second paragraph above on China is from a recent article in the New Scientist (June 2006), the first paragraph – a series of anecdotes from the Millennium Edition of The Economist (December 1999) – is not describing present-day China. In fact, unnervingly and coincidentally, it describes Britain’s industrial revolution, the period between 1670 and 1850! If it feels like déjà vu, it was intended. Perhaps poor learners or indeed creatures of habit, we seem to repeat experiments without retrospection of past imposts of change.

The Economist goes on to describe the cholera epidemics and the misery depicted by writers from Dickens to D.H. Lawrence of Britain. ‘Despite the efforts of some employers, charities and eventually local authorities, improvement was slow before the end of the 19th century’. There is no doubt perhaps a need for some similar writers to document for future generations the effects of climatic and other human-induced pollution on present day society.

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