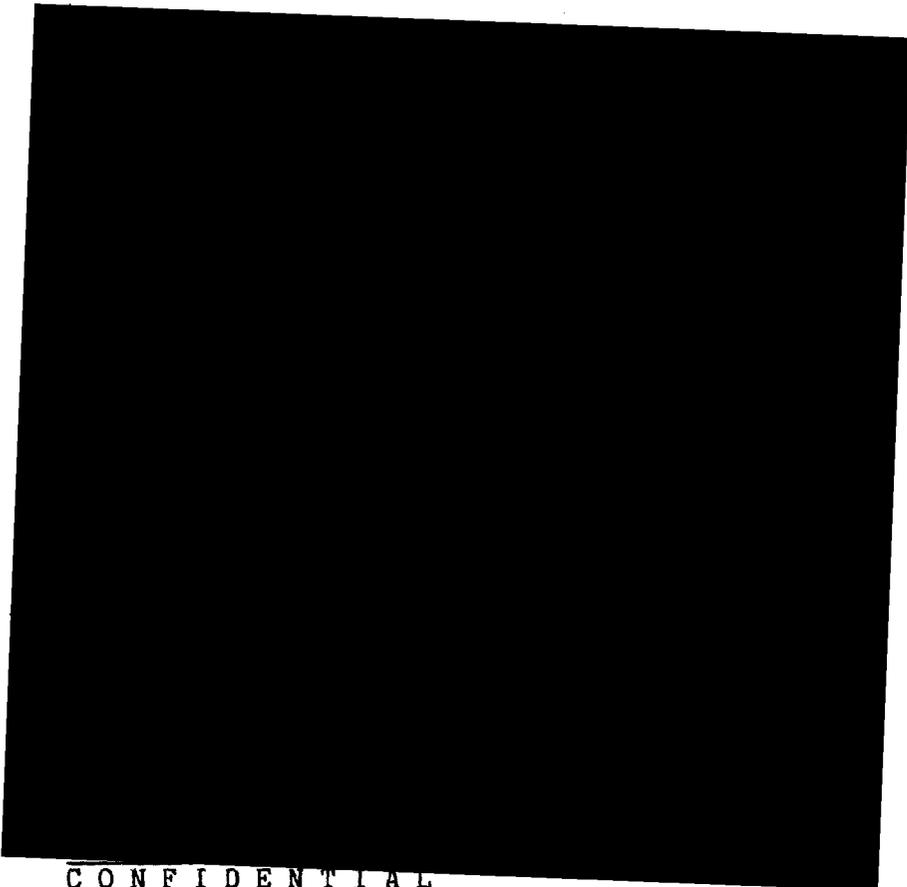


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C O N F I D E N T I A L

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FOLLOWING MESSAGE TRANSMITS CHENGDU 331 QUOTE

E.O. 12356: N/A

/***** THIS IS A COMBINED MESSAGE *****/

BODY

TAGS: PGOV, SCUL, ECON, CH

SUBJECT: SHANDONG CIRCUS THRILLS SICHUAN CROWDS AND
- EARNS MONEY FOR PROVINCIAL CULTURAL BUREAU

1. (U) SUMMARY: CHINA'S CIRCUS TRADITION PREDATES RINGLING BROTHERS BY MANY CENTURIES BUT IS NOW CLOSE TO EXTINCTION. CONGENOFF WAS LUCKY TO ENCOUNTER CHINA'S ONLY REMAINING ROAD SHOW DURING A VISIT TO THE SICHUAN TOWN OF YIBIN. THE CIRCUS, FROM SHANDONG, HAS BEEN PERFORMING IN SICHUAN FOR OVER ONE YEAR. THE SHOW REPRESENTS A POTPOURRI FROM MANY PERFORMING TRADITIONS, INCLUDING BEIJING OPERA, ACROBATICS, "QIGONG," DISCO DANCING AND BODYBUILDING. AS A SIGN OF HOW FAR THE ANNUAL CONTRACT ("CHENGBAO") SYSTEM HAS PENETRATED, EVEN THIS CIRCUS HAS A "CHENGBAO."
END SUMMARY.

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THE BIG TOP COMES TO TOWN

2. (U) DURING A MARCH 3-9 VISIT TO THE SOUTHERN / SICHUAN TOWN OF YIBIN, CONGENOFF'S CURIOSITY WAS AROUSED BY A HUGE TENT ERECTED IN A PUBLIC SQUARE ALONG THE TOWN'S MAIN BOULEVARD. THERE WAS A CARNIVAL-LIKE ATMOSPHERE IN THE AIR. VENDORS SOLD LAMB SHISH KEBABS ROASTED OVER CHARCOAL AND SOLDIERS PATRONIZED SHOOTING GALLERIES, TAKING AIM AT COLORFUL BALLOONS. MEMBERS OF A BRASS BAND, WEARING ARMY CLOTHING STRIPPED OF ALL INSIGNIA AND REMINISCENT OF A SALVATION ARMY BAND, PLAYED POORLY BUT WITH GREAT GUSTO. THE GATHERING CROWD WAS WOODED BY A HAWKER SELLING TICKETS FOR NONE OTHER THAN THE SHANDONG SHUIBO LIANGSHAN CIRCUS. ABOUT THE ONLY INGREDIENT MISSING WAS A BEARDED LADY AND OTHER FREAKS, BUT TO MANY MEMBERS OF THE CROWD, CONGENOFF SEEMED TO BE AN ACCEPTABLE STAND-IN.

A THRILL A MINUTE

3. (U) THE HAWKER'S SPIEL WAS IRRESISTABLE. THE CIRCUS WAS BILLED AS ONE OF ONLY THREE REMAINING CIRCUSES IN CHINA. DOUBLE-BILLED WITH THE CIRCUS WAS "QIGONG" MASTER DING HUA, A RENOWNED MASTER OF "HARD" QIGONG FROM WUTAI MOUNTAIN AND AN ADVISER TO THE BEIJING FILM STUDIO. QIGONG IS A MYSTERIOUS PRACTICE. THROUGH THE MASTERY OF AN INNER FORCE, PRACTITIONERS ACQUIRE EXTRAORDINARY POWERS, SUCH AS THE ABILITY TO DIAGNOSE AND HEAL ILLNESS AND TO PREVENT INJURY FROM SHARP OR HEAVY OBJECTS.

4. (U) THE ONE-HOUR PERFORMANCE INCLUDED SEVERAL QIGONG ACTS. ONE PERFORMER STOOD ON EGGS WITHOUT BREAKING THEM. ANOTHER DANCED BAREFOOT ON A BED OF BROKEN GLASS. YET ANOTHER PERFORMER LAY ON A BOARD OF UPRIGHT NAILS; SHE WAS COVERED WITH A BIG ROCK WHICH WAS THEN SMASHED BY ANOTHER PERFORMER, WITHOUT INJURY TO THE QIGONG MISTRESS. MASTER DING HUA AMAZED THE CROWD BY BREAKING A HUGE ROCK IN HALF WITH A KARATE KICK.

5. (U) A VARIETY OF OTHER ACTS--A HOUDINI-LIKE MAGIC PERFORMANCE, A FLYING TRAPEZE, BALANCING ACTS, CLOWNS, ACROBATICS PERFORMED ON HORSES RACING AROUND THE SMALL RING INSIDE THE TENT--ALL KEPT THE AUDIENCE ENTERTAINED. EVERYONE LEFT WITH THE FEELING THAT THEIR 1.5 YUAN (ABOUT THE COST OF TWO MOVIES) HAD BEEN WELL-SPENT. THIS CIRCUS HAD A SENSE OF IMMEDIACY NOT EASY TO FIND IN BARNUM AND BAILEY'S. AS THE HORSES RACED AROUND THE RING, THE SPECTATORS COULD FEEL THE

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