



A Short Essay

30 Years of Change in China

I arrived at Beijing University in 1982. As an aspiring Sinologist, I had what most rational people thought a totally impractical Chinese language degree from a liberal arts college in the US. It was China's uniqueness that attracted me, not the possibility it would increasingly resemble the rest of the world, as it sometimes does today.

The early 1980s was an idyllic, fascinating time to be an idealistic, somewhat naïve foreigner in China. Experiential immediacy permeated everyday activities. Foreigners aroused curiosity, were misperceived to know more than we did, had excellent access to wide sections of society, and built special friendships. By contrast, it was very difficult to be Chinese. The country's self-destructive post-revolutionary downward spiral had started in the late 1950s and included the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution and the Gang of Four. These left several important legacies.

Firstly, control was everywhere, reaching Orwellian proportions. Rule was not by law but by man, primarily Deng Xiaoping, the country's paramount leader. Dissenters disappeared to the gulag and punishment for misdeeds was severe. In 1985, I saw criminals on flat-back trucks wearing dunce caps paraded en route to public execution in a stadium. Jobs were assigned, freedom of expression was unknown and

my local classmates waited until they strolled around the campus' 'No Name Lake' before fantasising aloud about leaving the country.

China was still a small, planned economy, almost entirely state-owned and unproductive. PPP per capita was \$324 and hundreds of millions of people (by some accounts) lived below the poverty line. Transportation and communication infrastructures were undeveloped. There was no economic incentive to improve productivity and consumerism was non-existent. Locals, excluding ultra-elite party members with questionable sources of wealth, could only purchase essentials. Supply was equally limited. Foreigners, who used a special currency, could only buy many items at 'friendship stores', which were only friendly if you were not from China. Locals needed a hard-to-obtain pass to enter, while the special currency proved a rare source of entrepreneurial activity, creating a robust black market for currency exchange.

The education system was in tatters. National examinations for college entrance were suspended for 11 years during the Cultural Revolution. In 1980, only 147,000 people graduated from college. Individuals who did go to college were often taught propaganda by unqualified educators. One of my Beijing University professors was a likable but uneducated man from

the countryside who was assigned because of his peasant credentials. China's highly sophisticated cultural heritage was nearly invisible and I learned more about classical Chinese philosophy at a US college than my Chinese peers in Chinese universities.

The country was internationally isolated. It had positioned itself as the leader of the third world based on a part-utopian, part-practical vision. Chairman Mao told the people China was the strongest, richest country and it was their duty to liberate the world's downtrodden. Meanwhile, the country was removed from the rapidly changing, interconnected, developed world. If I sometimes felt like a welcomed alien walking on a friendly moon in 1982, most Chinese people at that time did not yet know man had been to the moon.

This all resulted in a lack of hope. A popular contemporary Chinese joke had Ronald Reagan, Mikhail Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping asking God how long it would take for necessary changes to come for their countries. Reagan and Gorbachev cried upon hearing God's answer; when Deng asked, it was God who cried.

Through the 1980s and 1990s it was inconceivable China could change as categorically as it has today. Of course, serious challenges have occurred – Tiananmen, the 1997 financial crisis, non-performing loans, SARS – yet each time the country has bounced back even stronger.

The critical difference to the 1980s is that it is now infinitely better to be Chinese. Standards of living have risen dramatically, millions have been lifted out of poverty, the economy has liberalised and flourished, and many state controls have loosened. Individual optimism has risen accordingly.

However, despite its undeniable economic success, many Chinese speak nostalgically, comparing the past favorably against the present. From their perspective, lack of wealth was a great equaliser and today's rampant materialism was a non-issue. Ignorance translated to innocence while limited external experience ignited endless curiosity. Corruption existed, but it was characterized by the pursuit of power and privilege, not money.

Overall, China's progress has entailed a series of paradoxes. Governance remains under one-party, authoritarian rule although people have incomparably greater freedoms today than hitherto. As a Beijing friend recently observed: "The Communist Party has gone from being a family business ruled by a patriarch to a jointly held stock company managed by a Board of Directors." The palpable oppression of the 1980s and before is mostly invisible today. People speak openly in informal public settings about China's and the Party's shortcomings in a way previously impossible without serious consequences. The old system of allocating jobs, a major student grievance during the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations, was scrapped long ago. The legal system has been overhauled, although consistent and transparent implementation of law remains elusive.

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Yet, although the Chinese government is more self-confident, enabling it to refrain from the draconian measures employed in the recent past, its political challenges have evolved. The widening wealth gap and pervasive corruption are perhaps the most acute and they have become major new impediments to the Chinese people achieving their full potential. There are also persisting historical problems relating to the underdeveloped rule of law, the lack of checks and balances on power, the absence of an independent media and repression of public dissent. The heavy-handed detention of the artist Ai Weiwei, a wonderful human and a long-time friend, was handled horribly.

The economic success needs no introduction. China's rise is perfectly captured in the single data point of 2,215% growth in PPP per capita from 1982 to 2010. Lives have improved materially, providing the Party with an alternative to excessive control by which to maintain unchallenged rule. A market economy with countless companies expanding profitably wasn't even a fantasy in 1982.

However, Deng Xiaoping was prescient when he said market reforms would lead to open windows which, in turn, would allow "mosquitoes to fly in." He also famously said, "To get rich is glorious," the (mis)guiding principle of development which has been a primary cause of the wealth gap and corruption. Kickbacks and illegal payments occur in everything from everyday business transactions to medical care.

Education has vastly improved and is now widely available. In 2010, 5.75 million people graduated from college. The propaganda curriculum has been replaced by commercially-oriented degrees commensurate with a society focused on wealth. While many of the brightest still go overseas to obtain degrees, they increasingly return home to apply the knowledge gained. For those who stay, numerous associations have been established with leading international universities.

However, societal pressures have emerged as education certifications are prerequisites to advancement. Children

sacrifice large portions of their childhoods in pursuit of increasingly costly education funded, often with great difficulty, by parents in a competitive and commercialised system. Education is now a branch of economic activity. Assistance in certification obtainment has become an area of valuable expertise. It is also another avenue to corruption, with teachers even known to accept kickbacks for arranging for pupils to sit at the front of the classroom.

No longer isolated, China is now the world's second largest economy. This was unthinkable 30 years ago. The change in its international stature and economic influence cannot be overstated. If my choice to live there in 1982 was novel, today the country is critical to the strategic decision-making of all global companies. It will ultimately become as important in international politics and culture.

Yet while China's international emergence has been almost overwhelmingly positive, it has drawbacks, not least amongst the ignorant nationalists who do not appreciate the country is still in the nascent stages of development. Nevertheless, there is a sense that, as walls cave in elsewhere, tomorrow will be better than today in China. That hope, however, is contrasted by a new despair, with many fearing they will be left behind as others prosper.

The next 30 years will probably prove as hard to predict as the last. Sustained prosperity and stability will depend on China's ability to navigate the expanding needs and aspirations of its increasingly educated people who will live in a globalised world. In particular, there is much still to be done in areas far beyond economics to ensure positive societal and cultural change. Here progress has been slow.

A Beijing University classmate, an Iranian poet who arrived in China in 1977, sagaciously counseled that everyone who goes to China can write a three volume set about their impressions after one week. Output falls to one volume after one month. After six months ambitions narrow to a novel. A year later the best one can manage is an essay.

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