

TOP TEN THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT CHINA IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

By Tese Wintz Neighbor

TEN—THE PAST IS NOT SO FAR AWAY China is one of the world's oldest continuous civilizations. This ancient culture of shared legends, rituals, ideas, traditions, and written language helps to explain even today why the Chinese people act the way they do and how they interpret their world.

The Chinese early on set up a pantheon of “brilliant human beings” who were “inventors of Chinese culture.” These extraordinary “mythical sages” were fathers of agriculture, industry, family institutions, and writing. They domesticated animals and invented boats and carts, ploughs and hoes, and bows and arrows. They established calendars and rituals, state institutions and hereditary succession. One of them was Yu the Great, who supposedly founded the Xia Dynasty (ca. 2200–1750 BCE). This legendary father of flood control is in the Chinese news even today. The Chinese compare his great flood-quelling ability with that of the engineers who are building the (estimated) 30 billion dollar Three Gorges Dam on the Yangzi River and who claim it will generate as much power as eighteen nuclear power plants and tame floods at the same time.

China's present continues to reflect seminal ideas and great discoveries from China's past. For example, 3,000-year-old oracle bone inscriptions included the following divination: “Lady Hao gave birth and it may not be good.” And verification: “She gave birth. It really was not good. It was a girl.”¹ China's strict birth control policy today is at loggerheads with such attitudes that have survived three millenniums. Today women are sometimes caught in a catch-22—permitted to conceive one or two children by the government but criticized (and worse) by their husbands and parents-in-law when that child is a girl because of the ancient tradition that says women must bear a son to secure the male family line. In rural China, especially, this “moral” obligation reinforces a “practical” one. Since most daughters still leave their families, and often villages, when they marry, a son provides rural parents with necessary social security in old age.

China's past is important for us to study so that we understand Chinese reactions to modern events. For more than a decade leading up to Hong Kong rejoining Mainland China in 1997, thousands of front-page articles in the foreign press predicted political, economic, and social chaos. But to my Chinese friends, home and abroad, the handover was above all a *symbolic* event, the official end to China's “unequal” relations with Western powers since the first Opium War (1839–42). Chinese of all ages would discuss this war and the hundred-plus years following as some of the darkest pages in Chinese history. As the various clocks throughout China counted down the month, day, hour, minute, and second until July 1, 1997, so too did many Chinese as they symbolically threw off years of suffering, war, division, and strife—and embraced their modern “equal” world nation status.

NINE—THE CALL TO MODERNIZE WAS NOT AN EMPTY SLOGAN I remember visiting China in the late 70s, and living there in the early 80s, and being bombarded by “Four Modernizations” billboards all across the country: “Modernize China by 2000 in Agriculture, Industry, Science and Technology, and Defense.” Dodging a man transporting a huge sofa on his bicycle while noticing yet another billboard, I rode my bike to work where Chinese colleagues and I would pound out articles using 40-year-old typewriters. How could this gigantic, poor country modernize by 2000?

Well, it has. Over the past two decades, China has experienced tremendous progress in the Four Modernizations and more. How could anyone have predicted the incredible tiger ride that China has pursued since Deng Xiaoping instituted reforms and uttered the phrase: “Black cat, white cat, who cares what color the cat is as long as it catches mice?” Headlines abound describing China's entry into the twenty-first century:

- China's economy defies the worldwide slowdown and continues its long streak of rapid growth. In human terms this growth means that many Chinese now enjoy material benefits that were largely absent two decades ago.
- Industry in China continues to expand and grow in almost every category of manufactured goods from shoes to cameras, from bikes to semiconductors.
- China is the world's largest agricultural producer, feeding 22 percent of the world's population on less than 10 percent of the world's arable land.
- Foreigners have invested more money in the PRC in 2002 than anywhere else in the world, including the US.

With these spectacular headlines comes the fine print that describes some harsh realities:

- China, in several decades, has gone from one of the most egalitarian societies to one with yawning gaps between rich and poor.
- Closing down or downsizing some of the state-owned enterprises (SOEs) has left millions unemployed.
- Farmers with tiny plots of land can no longer support their families as taxes, education, and health care prices increase.
- China is facing a critical shortage of fresh water—an essential element needed to sustain not only the human population, but also the industrial and agricultural engines that drive China's economic growth.

EIGHT—“SOCIALISM WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS” ALLOWS FOR ECONOMIC EXPERIMENTATION Today people—both inside and outside China—debate whether or not capitalism will replace communism in the future in

the People's Republic. They describe what is going on variously as: *market Leninism, socialist market economy, authoritarian capitalism, developmental autocracy, dot communism, or Confucian capitalism*. For now the official phrase for China's economic transformation is "*Socialism with Chinese Characteristics*."

While textbook socialism calls for the end of private property and for government ownership of the means of production and the distribution of goods, "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" seems to be loosely defined as "whatever improves your life." Meanwhile, capitalism is commonly practiced, albeit not publicly endorsed. Chinese entrepreneurs go about their businesses—heeding the late Deng Xiaoping's words in 1992 to stop asking whether policies are "surnamed socialism or surnamed capitalism."

So who is running this locomotive now? Is Beijing setting the national agenda or are millions of entrepreneurs (from fish farmers in the Yangzi delta to toy manufacturers in Shenzhen) changing China's economic and social landscape? Some would say that the "get rich quick" provinces (like Guangdong Province in southern China) are not only setting their own economic path, but are charting new courses in the media and politics. The old Chinese saying "the mountains are high and the emperor is far away" is just as relevant today. The powers that be in Beijing are no longer grappling with whether to choose a future of rapid change. Rather, they are dealing with the consequences of these changes inside and outside of Beijing.

SEVEN—"C AND N" IN CHINA Rampant corruption occurs at all levels throughout the People's Republic. High government officials amass fortunes and rural tax collectors siphon off a few *yuan* here and there. Urban party bosses choose their children to run banks and businesses. Local officials embezzle public money to build their own rural estates. Judges are easily bribed. These and other forms of corruption and nepotism (C and N) are stories that often lead the daily news. Although a few senior officials have been prosecuted, the majority escapes criminal prosecution—feeding public cynicism.

While the "rule of law" is slowly being instituted in China, the norm is still the "rule of men." With the absence of mechanisms such as an independent judiciary and free press to check the misuse of power, corruption and nepotism continue to grow.

The popularity of the communist movement before 1949 and into the 1950s was due in large part to its reputation for honesty and discipline, especially that of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Over the years, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the PLA have lost this reputation and some would say their mandate to rule. This development is of no small concern. Before Jiang Zemin stepped down as General Secretary of the CCP in late 2002, he exhorted the 2,114 delegates at the Sixteenth Party Congress: "If we do not crack down on corruption, the flesh-and-blood ties between the party and the people will suffer a lot and the party will be in danger of losing its ruling position, or possibly heading for self-destruction."²

SIX—THE PARTY'S NOT OVER Front page stories in the Western press in recent years report that the Communist Party, which once insinuated itself into every "nook and cranny" of society, now seems irrelevant to the Chinese in their day-to-day lives. Yet the party in China is far from over. Its grip on the government, law enforcement, military, and the media remains strong. It is true

that democratic elections at the village level have brought in new blood, but locally appointed CCP officials continue to wield much of the power in the small towns across rural China. And in urban leadership and senior management jobs in rural and urban enterprises, party membership is crucial. Despite university students' attraction to western fads and culture and their ambivalence toward Chinese politics, college students continue to join the ranks of party membership as a way to get ahead. While overall respect for party officials has declined and cynicism has increased, party membership is at a 66 million high—or 5 percent of the population.

The one-party political system may remain firmly in place, but it is facing new challenges. The party is changing from its historical position as the vanguard of the working people to now include its role as the vanguard of the "advanced productive forces." Private sector millionaires are becoming party members. Newly-elected delegates of People's Congresses are calling for open hearings, asking to see budgets, demanding resignations of corrupt officials, and conducting investigations of tax hikes. Non-party members are reading the local election laws and campaigning for office. Party officials are faced with public discontent among the unemployed in the forms of mass strikes, popular protests, collective petitions, organized blocking of highways, airfields, and railroad tracks, and sporadic acts of violence. Chinese of all ages and backgrounds are demanding improvements in water and air quality, education, pension pay, health care, public safety, and tax relief. Today the burden of the Chinese Communist Party is to do three things at the same time: keep the economy growing; deal with rising grievances and social inequalities; and maintain leadership and control.

FIVE—DEMOCRACY IS BY STEALTH Change in China often happens in zigzag ways. Although a number of Chinese were imprisoned in 1998 while trying to set up China's first opposition party, that same year village elections (previously held on an experimental level) were mandated by law. And then when unauthorized elections occurred at the township level and were declared unconstitutional, some provinces "zagged" and conducted "voter-survey recommendations" on who should become the town magistrate. There have even been reports at the grassroots level of non-party people electing village party branch officials. This is more than a "zig"—this is a revolutionary idea especially if instituted at higher levels.

Turn on the TV and follow an investigative journalist interviewing a fish farm owner whose fish have died. Watch in living color as the reporter films factory workers upstream dumping pollutants into the water. Boot up the computer and you've got mail—from chat rooms discussing US foreign policy to Web sites or bulletin boards focusing on intellectual theories. Go out to the movies and experience urban life through the eyes of the Sixth Generation filmmakers as they bring contemporary problems of prostitution and economic disparity to the big screen. Flip on the radio or lounge in a Beijing bar and experience popular songs as a type of musical protest.

Yet cases of persecution and exploitation continue. Political dissidents are detained, Falungong members are sent to labor camps, other religious practitioners (such as Christians, Tibetan Buddhists, and Muslims) are persecuted, labor disputes are muffled, internet access is blocked, NGOs are under strict legislation, and prisoners are exploited for their labor.

As I review my own list here, I find I am missing a crucial element of life in today's China. Millions of people wake up in the morning living a life far beyond their expectations of just a short decade ago.

Still, the voices of democracy stealthily seep through bureaucratic cracks (and computers) across urban and rural China. Although the US was considered a democracy from its inception (when only landowners could freely vote), it took the States almost 200 years to create civil rights legislation and a more democratic society. As China's middle class continues to grow and a civil society carefully develops, the CCP leadership, under citizen pressure, may cut this time in half and then some.

FOUR—NATIONAL PRIDE IS STRONG “A more democratic China is not necessarily a less nationalistic China,” said Xiao Qiang, executive director of Human Rights in China, a New York-based group.³ Similarly, the new generation of Chinese youth who continue to don blue jeans, study English, play basketball, eat Kentucky Fried Chicken, and openly express their opinions through chat rooms and call-in talk shows are not necessarily pro-US. From the American bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999, to the collision between the Chinese fighter jet and a US spy plane, to the Bush Administration “go-it-alone” policy with regard to Iraq, Chinese citizens are expressing their opposition to US policies and their support for a strong China.

Some China watchers attribute the growing patriotism among the Chinese to a concerted effort by the Communist leaders after the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests to cultivate nationalism as a unifying force. With the party discredited after the violent crackdown on the student democracy movement, the leadership hoped to bolster patriotism in order to stop the growing cynicism and alienation. Both are still apparent among today's youth. Although too young to remember what happened at Tiananmen, many young adults, like their parents, are disgruntled with the Chinese leadership due to rising corruption, lack of law enforcement, increasing unemployment, and widening gaps between rich and poor. In addition, some say the Chinese are experiencing a type of spiritual void. While Mao replaced Confucianism with a “serve the people” philosophy, and Deng replaced Maoism with a “to get rich is glorious” creed, the current emphasis on materialism has contributed to spiritual emptiness among some. Growing national pride may soften cynicism towards the party and fill some of the spiritual void.

THREE—THE MEANING OF CHAOS An underlying theme throughout Chinese history has been the quest for unity and stability. Confucius lived in a tumultuous period more than 2,000 years ago and sought harmony and order. Sun Yat-sen, father of the modern Chinese nation, described China as a sheet of loose sand and agonized over the way to build a strong and united nation. In recent years China has seen growing gaps between rich and poor, the developed east and the undeveloped west, urban dwellers and villagers, and even between generations. Now with China's population topping the 1.3 billion mark and popular opinion more openly expressed, the fear of chaos continues to haunt the twenty-first century leadership.

As mentioned earlier, far from a people marching in step to CCP directives, individuals as well as regional leaders are exerting independent views. The provincial leaders of Guangdong, the wealthiest province in China, have sometimes made decisions without consulting the central government. Leaders in the Southwest hinterland of Chongqing have demanded (and received) increasing autonomy. And like regional officials, the man or woman on the street is becoming more politically assertive. Today the debate over the proper balance between the risks of chaos and the demands for more freedom is shared by both party officials and common people.

TWO—CHINA IS DIVERSE “One's approach to China's diversity is first of all visual,” wrote the late China historian John King Fairbank.⁴ Even if you have never been to China you know from postcards and coffee table books that China conveys many diverse geographic images. You can picture the highest mountains in the world and some of the most desolate deserts. You can imagine a landscape of rice paddies carved into sides of mountains in southern China and the Great Wall snaking through the hills of northern China. You can visualize sky-scraping buildings of Shanghai and the stilt huts of Xishuangbanna.

China is that and more.

In addition to China's varied climates and urban and rural landscapes, China supports the largest and perhaps most diverse population in the world. While the majority is Han Chinese (quite diverse among themselves), China's minority population of more than 100 million is divided into fifty-five officially designated “national minorities” (*shaoshu minzu*) or ethnic groups. Many of these groups live in the remote and mountainous areas of southwestern China or in the deserts and steppes of northwestern and northern China. These include (to name only a few) the Mongol, Yao, Tibetan, Yi, Miao, Uyghurs, Hui, Bai, Korean, and Dai. A number of them still have their own unique language, food, music, religious practices, and marriage customs.

With the economy growing so quickly, society is vastly different from what it was twenty years ago. “Little emperors and empresses” are growing into big ones.⁵ Individualism is on the rise, as young adults make their own decisions with regard to education, work, spouses, fashion, and leisure activities. A generation gap is apparent as youth today (especially in the urban areas) follow a lifestyle far different from that of their parents who grew up during the Cultural Revolution. Gaps between rich and poor continue to widen.

China's diversity in all these regards is important to help us discern between the homogeneous, monolithic entity often portrayed in western media and the complex reality that contours the country. Just as portraying the United States as an image of a Norman Rockwell “All American” kid would undermine a meaningful understanding of the United States, so too does a simplified and shallow image of “China.”

ONE—NOT TO KNOW CHINA IS NO LONGER AN OPTION

Some would say that the relationship between the US and China is the most crucial relationship in the world today. Whether you agree or disagree with this, “misunderstanding China” or not wanting to know more about China carries risks that cannot be endured, if we wish to live in a peaceful world. Despite some ups and downs, our two governments continue to foster a relationship based on economic, military, and social ties; and shared concerns over terrorism, drug trafficking, a nuclear North Korea, and security throughout northeast Asia. Due to globalization and China’s massive economic take-off, over half of the clothes we wear and many of the products we use are made in China. For more than a century, US entrepreneurs have dreamed of tapping into the huge China market. Today companies are following their dreams, selling everything from coffee to hamburgers to computer technology.

Learning about China today is no simple task, but gaining access to information is certainly easier than it was a few decades ago. Through the information highway, we now have access to PRC newspapers, foreign ministry Web sites, and list-serves on Chinese topics. We can and should use this access to form opinions and ties.

As I review my own list here, I find I am missing a crucial element of life in today’s China. Millions of people wake up in the morning living a life far beyond their expectations of just a short decade ago. Life is not all angst and issues for people in China. They have more freedom to choose where they live and where they work and whom they marry. Chinese parents spoil their “little emperors and empresses” with ice cream and construct small family shrines for their ancestors. They ballroom dance at sunrise in their local park and take boat rides at dusk. They argue about politics and cards and joke with friends and relatives. What keeps me going back to China year after year are not the economic wonders, but the wonderful people, their amazing spirit, their generous hospitality, and their outspoken dreams for a modern culture, prosperous economy, and democratic system *all with Chinese characteristics*. ■

NOTES

1. Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 4.
2. Erik Eckholm, “China’s Leaders Urge Party to Reform Economy, Not Politics,” *New York Times*, A3, November 9, 2002.
3. Nicholas Kristof, “Guess Who’s a Chinese Nationalist Now?” *New York Times*, sec. 4, 1, April 22, 2001.
4. John King Fairbank. *China: A New History*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 4.
5. Little emperors and empresses is a reference to spoiled children growing up with no brothers or sisters as a result of the one child policy.

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