

My Experiences in China

Mr Dominique Dreyer

Two preliminary remarks.

(a) Views expressed in the article are entirely my own and do not, unless specified otherwise, reflect in any way the official policy of my country.

(b) Being a diplomat of a small Western European country that has a long tradition of neutrality and no colonial past, I realize that the way I look at China may be quite different from that of people belonging to a vast country that is not only a neighbour of China but has had also a very chequered history in her bilateral relations.

1974 to 1978

I had the privilege to be assigned in China for 16 years altogether, at three different, but quite significant periods, in the recent history of China. This enabled me to have some insight in the developments of China.

I propose to describe briefly my impressions derived from my three assignments in China. Based on this experience, I would like to draw some historical considerations that seem to me of relevance in explaining the present situation of China, especially her rapid development in the last twenty-five years. Finally, it may be of interest also to try to speculate about China's future development, especially seen from the political angle.

My first stay in China started in September 1974. Conscious of the need to train some diplomats in so-called "difficult foreign languages", the Swiss Foreign Ministry had sent me previously to England to attend a nine-month crash course in Chinese. Arriving in Beijing after a long flight that took me through Dubai to Karachi with Swissair, and then with Air France to Beijing, I was plunged in a country that looked quite different from all others. It was my first assignment abroad. My linguistic abilities in Chinese were still limited. I had no friends there. Beijing resembled a huge village

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with few modern buildings. I still remember my first evening, strolling along the lanes close to my hotel, surrounded by a crowd of faces staring at me as if I came from another planet, and me looking at them as if I had actually come to another planet.

In 1974, China was in some way recovering from the excesses of the so-called "cultural revolution". It was still a closed country, where any foreigner was regarded as highly suspicious. If he came from the West, as I did, he was a capitalist, implicitly an enemy of socialism in the Chinese sense. If he came from a socialist State, meaning from the Soviet Union or one of its satellite, he was regarded as a "revisionist", an enemy of the dogmatic version of Marxism-Leninism that China had adopted. If he came from the "Third World", he was most likely to be from a poor country, supposed to be a friend of China but too poor really to matter. Private contacts with foreigners were basically forbidden, or, when they could not be prevented, strictly controlled. Foreign culture was forbidden, except for a few foreign music or artistic troupes that were allowed from time to time to tour China and perform before selected audiences for the sake of pretending to entertain cultural links with the outside world. Needless to say, news media were practically nonexistent, being replaced by official propaganda. Around Beijing, there were limits beyond which foreigners were not allowed to go. The destinations in the country that were accessible to them and to foreign tourists were limited to two or three dozens. There was no way to know how people lived, or what they were thinking, if they would risk at all to think anything different from the official line as delivered daily by the party and by the state propaganda.

Foreigners were very few in China. In Beijing, excluding a small group of long-time foreign friends of the Communist party, you had a few hundreds of diplomats as well as a few dozen of foreign journalists. Foreign experts would be assigned in remote places in the provinces for the construction of a few industrial projects. Their sense of isolation would be even greater than for the diplomats in Beijing. And then, you had the foreign students: in 1972, the Institute of Foreign Languages started recruiting foreign students, having closed in 1966 at the beginning of the "Cultural Revolution". Strangely enough, foreign students had to share their room with a Chinese student, a way probably to have better control of the foreigner, but which enabled some of these foreign students

to get a rare insight into the life of the ordinary Chinese people, and even to forge true friendship with their appointed chaperon.

The regime could of course not keep the country completely immune from foreign news and information. It needed some information on scientific progress. Applying a policy reminiscent of the late Imperial China's attempt to let foreign science and knowledge in while keeping Western Barbarians out, China started, after the years of the "Cultural Revolution", contacting foreign experts and foreign scientists after the years of the Cultural Revolution. Information from international news agencies was circulated among the higher spheres of the leadership in two restricted confidential publications.

The control of the population had reached a level unprecedented in the history of China. The rigorous application of the system of "hukou" prevented the rural people from entering the towns. The urban workers were all employed in state-owned enterprises, and these enterprises in turn were under the direct control of the party. Thus, loyalty to work meant loyalty to the party and, more often than not, loyalty to the local party secretary.

In 1974, China was embroiled in a severe political crisis. The impending succession to Mao Zedong intensified the struggle between the reformists gathered around Chou En-lai and the group that was propelled to power by Mao Zedong during the "Cultural Revolution", a struggle that had started with the death of Lin Piao in 1971 and the return to power of Deng Xiaoping in 1973.

A number of political campaigns were launched by the propaganda apparatus, in the hands of the "Cultural Revolution" faction against Chou En-lai, the most significant one being the so-called "*Pi-Lin Pi-Kong campaign*" (Criticize Lin Piao, criticize Confucius). In October 1975, a new campaign was launched which, under the pretext of denouncing a "revisionist" trend in the education policy, was in effect an attack against Deng Xiaoping. The death of Chou En-lai in January 1976 brought the struggle between the two camps to a new level.

The year 1976 - incidentally, a year of the dragon, if we go by the Buddhist astrological calendar - was probably one of the most extraordinary year in the recent history of China: the

appointment of Hua Guofeng as successor to Chou En-lai, whereas it was widely expected that this post would be taken up by Deng Xiaoping, was the clear sign of a deep division inside the leadership. In April 1976 came the official announcement of Deng Xiaoping's fall from power. Then came in July the death of Zhu De, vice-president of the Republic, one of the founders of China's army. At the end of July 1976, an earthquake devastated the town of Tangshan, causing the death of 230,000 people. On 8 September 1976, Chairman Mao died. One month later, his widow Qiang Sing and three of her closest associates, dubbed the "gang of four", were arrested in an operation that was nothing else but a real "coup d'etat", an event that took China and the world by surprise.

Almost immediately, the policy of the Communist party took a new turn: it was clear that the "cultural revolution" was definitely finished and that the excesses of an extreme dogmatic policy were to be corrected. The leadership concentrated its efforts first on putting some order in the economy and on rebuilding the educational system devastated by the ten year of the "Cultural Revolution".

The following year, in July 1976, Deng Xiaoping was officially rehabilitated, and although he never held, in later years, any official government function other than that of Head of the Military Commission, he became *de facto* the new leader of the Communist Party. And so we come to the decision of the Central Committee in December 1979 to set up a number of economic and political reforms, a decision that is the starting point of the 25 years of development China has since gone through.

Deng Xiaoping's Reforms

The role played by Deng Xiaoping in the modernisation of China cannot be overstressed. It was not expected that a Communist leader whose whole life had been devoted to serving a Marxist-Leninist party could bring about changes of such magnitude, to lift China out of stagnation, to instill a new vision into the Communist party, and to change so completely the lives of one fourth of mankind. It could not be expected that he would bluntly propose an economic policy that meant the abandonment of dogma based on the state distribution system and on total control of the economy by the state, an economic policy that

advocated the transition towards an open market economy, enabling China to benefit from all the advantages of international trade and foreign direct investments.

These reforms started with the liberalisation of the rural economy. By allowing peasants to produce freely their own products on the private plot allotted to them, by allowing them to sell freely on public markets, by privatizing the use of land, agricultural production jumped rapidly, and in a matter of a few years, the shortage of food that was plaguing China until 1978 was basically resolved.

And contrary to widely-held belief, the reform policy instituted by Deng Xiaoping meant not only economic reforms, it also brought about the rebuilding of a shattered judiciary, the concept of rule of law, the opening of China to foreign ideas, foreign news, and foreign culture. As regards foreign policy, China initiated a new strategy towards Taiwan, started negotiating with Great Britain on the status of Hong Kong, and embarked on an improvement of her relations with the Soviet Union. The establishment of formal diplomatic relations with the United States in 1979 had an immense impact for China's image in the world, particularly in the West, enhancing at the same time the image of the United States in China.

1984 to 1988

I missed many of these developments, since I left Beijing in May 1978 to take up my assignment in the Foreign Ministry in Bern. I was assigned again to China in June 1984 as Deputy Head of Mission until August 1988.

What was most striking during that period was the enthusiasm that could be perceived in China for the new orientation the country had taken. It was also remarkable to notice the personal freedom to speak that the Chinese people had started to enjoy. Although there was no freedom of speech or freedom of publication the way we would know it, yet the official publications had taken on liveliness and were dealing with a range of topics that were unprecedented in the history of the People's Republic. Basic problems like the independence of the judiciary, of the theory of the separation of the three powers were widely discussed in a number of publications in 1985 and 1986. Economic reforms were going on, although it

was apparent that this policy was creating new unforeseen problems. Further liberalisation was pursued, creating tensions inside the inner circle of the leadership.

During all that period, the development of reforms in China attracted a wide attention everywhere, and especially in the so-called "socialist camp". I have no proof to substantiate it, but it is my feeling that the Chinese experiences initiated by Deng Xiaoping had a wide impact in the Soviet Union and in the Eastern European countries.

1995 to 2004

In November 1995, I took my third assignment as Deputy Head of Mission in Beijing until January 1999, and was appointed Ambassador in China until October 2004.

Having left China only seven years before, I was again amazed by the changes that took place during these intervening years. Most conspicuous was the development of private enterprises and private shops. The first private restaurant in Beijing opened in 1983 or 1984. Ten years later, private restaurants were everywhere. Private enterprise was not only restricted to small entrepreneurs. Big private companies and rich capitalists had begun to emerge. At the same time, China had embarked on a very ambitious programme of infrastructure development. The opening of China to foreign investments was bearing fruits, with China becoming the "factory of the world".

This period was, and is, overshadowed by what I would call the "Tiananmen syndrome". The political crisis that led to the events of Tiananmen in May and June 1989 had left a deep mark on the Party. The realization that economic progress could be impaired by political upheavals and politic dissidence has led the Communist Party to consider almost as a dogma that strict control of the media and of political dissent is the only way to enable the economic reforms to go on. The monopoly of power of the Communist Party was inscribed in the Constitution by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980's already, and there is clearly no intention now to allow the power of the party to be weakened. On the other hand, the party has made determined efforts to improve the recruitment of new members, the appointment of higher cadres, the training of senior officials. Party schools and think tanks do

have lively discussions on many aspects of modernization of the party. But clearly, there is no let up in the vigilance of the leadership against any form of dissidence or of uncontrolled political organizations.

"Quand la Chine seveillera, le monde tremblera"

There is a famous saying in French, attributed for more than 100 years, although without proof, to Napoleon that says: "Quand la Chine seveillera, le monde tremblera": when China will wake up, the world will tremble. Obviously, what was unthinkable 30 years ago when I took up my first assignment in China has now taken place: China has obviously woken up from a century-old sleep. Is the world trembling? I would say yes, seeing the reactions that are caused by the awakening of China. Has it reasons to tremble? Let me give some of my views on that point.

It is debatable whether China is or not the oldest civilisation that flourished on our planet. Yet it may safely be said that it is the country with the longest political continuity. In the last 1500 years, dynasties have emerged, have been at war, have disappeared. But the number of years of division was never greater than the years of unity. And Chinese culture is most concerned with history.

China did not wait the Xth Century to be subject to foreign influences or even to foreign rule. But 1842 saw the first main intrusion by European powers, and this date remains in the view of the Chinese the departure point of Modern history. From 1842 to 1911, Chinese history is one of mounting crises caused by internal decay and outside encroachments, leading finally to the downfall of a monarchical system that had a history of at least three thousands years. 1911 was a revolution, a political one. It was followed by a true cultural revolution in 1919, when the young intellectual elite decided a number of reforms, the main one being to jettison the old classical written language and to use instead, in writing, the colloquial language. Then came the Japanese invasion, the Second World War, the Civil War, and the second revolution: the People's Republic of China. During all those years, the history of China was a history of tragedy and missed opportunities. Viewed in this context, the reform policy of Deng Xiaoping has to be regarded as the third revolution in the modern history of China, a revolution that enabled China to dream again of reaching the ranks of the foremost countries in the world.

Whatever the shortcomings of China's economic policies, few would put in doubt its overall success. The question that remains to be explored is: How was this possible? And how was it possible to transform a country from a closed Leninist type of economy to the kind of dynamic and ebullient force it has become?

In my view, we should first go back to history and explore the kind of national subconscience that is at work in modern China. China possesses, in my view, a number of characteristics that distinguishes it from similar big states:

- (a) As a culture, it has a fairly long, continuous and homogeneous history, which manifests itself probably most significantly in the continuous use of the same written language and script throughout three to four millennia. At the same time, it is a culture which has from very early on laid great stress on the writing of history, giving it sense of history which explains many of today's political attitudes of China's leadership.
- (b) This continuity in history produced a fairly stable political system based on the hereditary dynastic system as well as on a fairly rational and coherent administration based on the recruitment though examination: in other words, the bureaucracy was fairly open with a strong bias favouring talent rather than connection.
- (c) China was surrounded by countries the culture and power of which could not really compete with its own civilisation. Although the Chinese dynasties were more than once defeated by adjoining rulers, the invading powers were soon sinicised and adopted the Chinese ways of government and administration.
- (d) China had practically no contacts with the West until the beginning of the XIXth century. The constant encroachments of Western powers in China after 1842, coinciding with the growing weakening of China's political power, resulted in the awakening of nationalism and finally in the downfall of the monarchy in 1911 under the pressure of the young westernised Chinese intellectuals. 1911 was thus the first great revolution that China witnessed in modern history. An

attempt to introduce a parliamentarian system on the western model failed, and no party could fill the ensuing political vacuum. Local military leaders took power in their respective regions, leading to a division of China. The country fell in turmoil. The Japanese invasion gave rise to a new wave of nationalism. After the Second World War, the rise of the Communist Party and the Civil War led to a second revolution, with the victorious Communist Party setting up the People's Government and transforming the whole society of China through nationalisation and the economy and collectivisation of agriculture. Throughout the first part of the last century, nationalism was certainly one of the main driving forces of the Chinese elite. No doubt that the same force was driving a man like Deng Xiaoping, urging him to use all means available to push China towards the realization of a century-old dream, to become again the powerful and advanced country it once was in the past.

In some respects, the Communist Party has managed after 1979 to take on the traditional role that was the one played by the imperial bureaucracy. This tradition explains also the respect and regard that Mao Zedong still enjoys in the population at large. This tradition should also help us to think about the question of democracy in China. It will be up to the Chinese people to decide whether an open market economy can work properly for long with a closed political system dominated by a party that keeps itself immune from democratic control.

The dynamic action that Deng Xiaoping set into motion with his reform policy came after almost two decades of turbulences if not of violence. By lifting the strictures that prevented all forms of private enterprise, he enabled within a few years a significant lifting of the livelihood of the peasantry; the development of light industry everywhere improved the living standard of the people considerably, to the extent that now a real middle class in the major cities of China is enjoying a level of comfort that can be compared in some respect to that of European low middle-class. This explains also that with all its drawbacks, the policy of economic development forged in the 1980s could be attractive enough to have the population accept its disadvantages with an endurance that would otherwise not be possible.

What about the future?

What about political stability? Will the party remain in power? Will it be able to upkeep law and order in such a vast country?

China is certainly ridden by numerous internal tensions. The divide between rich and poor is widening. The gap between the East and the West of China is increasing. Does this necessarily lead to political turmoil? From the beginning of the reform policy in 1979, there have been no few cases of troubles and disorder in many places of China. Many cases of organisational disfunctioning have been exposed, not to speak about corruption. Yet, we should not forget that the new economic policies have brought about a significant reduction of the level of poverty. More than hundred million rural workers are jockeying for jobs - badly paid though they may be - in the booming towns of Eastern China, whereas their fathers were stuck in their villages surviving on subsistence agriculture. The Communist Party has managed to get through a number of important political crises, the most obvious one being Tiananmen in 1989. It has been able to put into place a coherent policy for economic development. This policy would not have been possible without a strong leadership and a stable political environment

It is remarkable that from the time of the Tiananmen events up to now, no new political crisis of such an extent has taken place in China. There are certainly some economic factors that made this possible. In particular, control of inflation, which was fairly high in 1988 and 1989, has helped to prevent a popular explosion of this extent. But the absolute control on the media and public expression of dissent could also have played a role. There is a clear perception within the Chinese leadership that a weakening of the party can only produce dissent and disorganisation, affecting at the same time the economic development. This perception seems to be fairly largely shared. The feeling that a "weakening of the Centre" might bring chaos seems widely shared in China and could well result from the trauma that the "cultural revolution" has produced in the collective psyche.

In the long run, the future of China will be determined not really by the local tensions and the main divides between the various regions of China, but more by the way China will be able to handle problems like access to energy, control of population

growth, development of the rural economy, development of social security, protection of the environment. All these problems will test the ability of the political system to adopt practical policies and also to adjust itself to the needs of the younger generations.

Experience shows that it is always presumptuous to make predictions. But in order to predict the future, we have at least one yardstick: the past, especially the developments of the last twenty years. And if we do project this past on to the future, there might at least be one conclusion: the Chinese can have some good reasons to be fairly optimistic as far as their future is concerned.

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