

China Diaries

Alan Macfarlane with Xiaoxiao Yan

China contains nearly a quarter of humankind. It has arguably the longest continuous history on earth, stretching back at least five thousand years. Many of the important technologies in the world were developed first in China and were then transferred to the west. These included the three which the philosopher Francis Bacon singled out as the basis of the modern world, the magnetic compass, the printing press and gunpowder.

For almost all of the last three thousand years China has been the most powerful, wealthy and inventive civilization on earth. It continued so until about 1800. Then for a brief two hundred years, a mere breath in its great history, it was mauled by predators from outside, first Britain and the west, then Japan. Now it is re-emerging from a century and a half of turmoil and the huge adjustments inaugurated by the Opium Wars of 1839-42 and ending with the liberalization of China with Deng Xiaoping from 1979.

It seems likely that China will again become the largest economy on earth within a generation. It currently has double the GDP of Japan, and over half that of the U.S. or Europe. Its economy is doubling every eight years or so. At the recent world economic summit at Davos, three words filled the corridors and the discussions: 'China, China, China'.

Yet *what*, exactly, is happening and *why* are almost unknown. Even the fact of the size of the events is largely unknown. Many in the world are like the sailors who landed on what they thought was an island. Only when they lit a fire did the whale shake itself and reveal its true nature. All of our present is already deeply affected by the fate of China. Our future will be even more so.

So how can we get behind the many representations of China today, put forward both by the Chinese government and western journalists?

Representations of China

It is easy to obtain a negative image of China. The western media usually accepts that China has had considerable material growth, and even concedes that this is largely what has contributed to a fall in the number of the absolutely poor on earth in the last two decades. Yet admiration for this extraordinary achievement is very quickly qualified with warnings that China has destroyed as much as it has created.

We are warned of the vast ecological destruction, symbolized by the largest dam in the world at the bottom of the Three Gorges on the Yangtze, which is covering much of archaeological value and displacing millions of people. The rapid growth of industries, particularly in the Russian and Japanese zones of North East China (former

Manchuria), we are told, has created some of the most polluted cities on the planet. It is often asserted that the forests are rapidly being destroyed and water is running out.

We are told of growing inequalities. The rich become rapidly richer, even if the poor also slightly improve their position. So the gaps, particularly between the more affluent city dwellers and rural peasants grow dangerously large.

Everywhere the old communal values induced by communism are being undermined by a crass materialism and individualism. The consumer obsessions and competitive striving of the worst forms of raw capitalism are penetrating every area of Chinese life.

Alongside them, it is implied, comes the sleaze which was temporarily suppressed by the communist revolution. The prostitution, drugs and gambling which was once famed in China is being revived, mixing in with the worst aspects of international crime. The triads, it is implied, are infiltrating back.

And what of the human cost? Sweated labour was always a characteristic of the energy-scarce and industrious Chinese way of life. Now, we are told, the conditions in China's industrial revolution are similar to the appalling sweat-shops of nineteenth century Liverpool or Manchester. Crowds of unprotected immigrants are flooding into the cities. Paid miserably, often injured by machinery, living in virtual slave dormitories, it is they who lie behind the Chinese miracle which has made 'Made in China' the stamp of our world.

Finally, we are often given a picture of political and religious persecution. China may be becoming a great thriving economy, going through a boom like Japan in the 70's and 80's, but it does not have 'democracy' or 'human rights'. We are told that the Chinese authorities persecute religious minorities like the Falun Gong today, as they persecuted Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century.

Political dissenters are kept in detention centres and labour camps without trial. The days of the worst excesses may be over, but we are warned that we can see the underlying attitude of the Chinese government in the way it bulldozed and shot its own 'democracy' students in Tianamen Square in 1989. Individual human rights, we are told, are absent.

Films like 'The Killing Rooms', made known to a generation of westerners the grisly consequences of the 'One Child' policy in terms of abortions and abandoned families. Ethnic minorities and in particular the Tibetans are oppressed. The press and the television are heavily censored.

To cap it all, the Chinese are thought to be cruel to animals (especially bears) and eat disgusting things such as dogs, cats and rats. They had a reputation in the past for being dirty and, as a recent documentary casually observed, spit everywhere. So a predominantly negative picture is built up.

Quite frankly, as a western consumer of the 'free press', I accepted much of this. I tut-tutted, sighing sadly that China seemed to be combining the worst of both worlds, the excesses of capitalism and the repressions of communism. 'One country with two

systems', the new slogan for Hong Kong, seemed apt but not to grasp the full sadness of what is happening.

Yet before accepting a picture which fits so neatly with the derogatory views of China which many westerners have had since the middle of the nineteenth century – treacherous, cunning, dirty, irreligious, omnivorous and over-crowded as it was alleged to be – I thought it might at least be sensible to pay a fleeting visit to confirm the details of this grim picture.

1996: the first trip – tourists in a tourist bubble.

So in 1996, with my wife and two friends, I went on an organized tourist trip. We stayed in four-star hotels, travelled in tourist buses, were always accompanied by guides. Although we hired a car and an interpreter for one day to visit remote villages, we were on the whole almost completely enveloped within the tourist bubble. We moved from Beijing and the Great Wall of China in the north, to the terracotta warriors in Xian and the amazing gorges of the River Liu, ending up after about ten days in pulsing Shanghai.

Even within the thick protection of our tourist isolation, we did see enough to slightly de-stabilize the negative impression. The people seemed cheerful. They did not noticeably spit in the streets, nor was China particularly dirty. It was no worse and no poorer than a European country like Portugal or Italy in the early 1970's. People seemed open and trustworthy. They answered our questions and were prepared to discuss politics and democracy, even if with a little caution. The hospital we visited was quite primitive, but we heard nothing of 'killing rooms' and no criticism of the 'one child' policy. We were amazed to find ordinary people in shops trading in stocks and shares.

Nor did we notice extreme materialism or consumerism, though many people were delighted that they could now afford good food and reasonable clothing and improved houses. They had suffered fifty years of regimented, austere, living, punctuated by a terrible period of famine in 1958-61 when between twenty and forty million people had starved to death. What was now happening seemed to them a miracle. Farmers told of how once they had hardly ever eaten meat; now they could eat what they liked. Their green-houses were producing bumper crops for which they could get really good money.

It was apparent even in 1996 that a mighty boom was occurring in some of the cities. Standing in the great drum tower in central Beijing, the whole skyline was ringed with hundreds of cranes. We heard of new cities emerging in the south-east near Hong Kong. Men with wheelbarrows were busily re-building the international airport. The tourist hotels were superb. There might still be cages of snakes and other strange creatures outside restaurants, but the cuisine was becoming gradually more western.

The visit was very tantalizing. There was little evidence to support the western stereotypes. On the other hand, being a tourist did not allow me to go deep under the surface to see what was *really* happening.

2002: expedition with Professor James Lee to the North-East.

The first accident which gave me a chance to dig deeper occurred when my wife and I were invited by Professor James Lee to accompany him and a team of researchers on an anthropological-sociological-demographic field trip to the very north eastern tip of China. This was to Liaoning Province or, as it used to be called, Manchuria. This was particularly interesting since this is where the Japanese had a puppet state and built up factory cities, later supplemented by Soviet-aided and style economic development.

Our 1994 'Lonely Planet' guide assured us that the cities were among the most polluted on earth, with the blue sky invisible behind a layer of toxic fumes. If I was to find the really grim world of the real China of western imagination, this was where it would be.

Professor Lee combined extensive local contacts and a high reputation (his father is a national treasure as the first Chinese Nobel Laureate), with one of the longest in-depth surveys of rural China ever made. So we would have a privileged and unique insight if we went with him. With his help we could visit remote villages in one of the poorest areas of China. With interpreters and contacts we could talk to officials from State Governors down to village headmen about current conditions. He could also arrange tours of factories, universities, 'down town' areas and we could investigate, observe and probably film.

So we cut a swathe from the great city of Beijing, through several middle-sized cities of 2-4 million, to provincial towns of hundreds of thousands, to a small town of a few thousand where we stayed, and then up into the hills to tiny, remote, villages.

We found that the economic and social change which had been partly apparent in 1996, but was now on a far greater scale. Beijing was amazing. From the moment we arrived at the sparkling international airport and drove down the beautiful tree-lined roads we found a new city. The buildings were extraordinary; the central shopping area vied with London or Paris. The cars were luxurious, not the tiny tin contraptions of 1996. The place was cleaner than London, there were less beggars in an average street than in Cambridge. There were no signs of the police or army. Tianamen Square was filled with cheerful sight-seers.

When we went to the provincial cities they were easily on a par with Manchester or Liverpool. Impressive universities the size of Cambridge were being thrown up in two years, others the size of London University in four years. Many small streets had cyber cafes. The shops, cars, clothes and expressions suggested successful and cheerful consumerism. People were optimistic, open-minded, direct and welcoming, and extremely curious about the West.

We did hear that one or two hotels were known for having call girls, that there were poorer areas on the fringes of Beijing with large numbers of migrant labourers. We did even see some pretty labour-intensive gardening in the University campus and some fairly primitive public sewage. But the middle-sized cities were booming and again there were few police, no fear when we talked to people, open criticism of the Party and Chairman Mao.

When we penetrated to the area so devastated by Japan-Russian industry we found the factories had been moved away and cleaned up. The air was clean, the environment being restored. All the major roads, stretching for miles (and of superb quality), were lined with two rows of trees. Out in the countryside, vast forest of half-grown trees were sprouting. A law had been passed that no trees were to be cut for fifty years. Such is the general law-abidingness that, unlike the situation in many other countries, the trees were left alone.

When we went down to the small town, even James Lee was amazed. A year before it had been without almost any amenities. Now it had a small hotel, new shops, many of the people had mobile phones, it was also booming. It was true that we bathed in a communal bath house and that our movements were watched and guided (the authorities were apparently afraid that they might get into trouble if anything unfortunate happened to us). But everyone again was friendly.

When we went to the remotest villages people spoke of how life was improving. They lived in simple but modest comfort, almost always with a TV and other devices, many with cars, most with children and relative sending back money from the cities.

As we sat in on hundreds of interviews with headmen and officials we heard how democracy worked at the local level. It was the village committee which decided what the new money should be spent on, a road, improved school, agricultural or industrial schemes. The local people said that they were independent, under no obvious central pressure.

The same was true at the regional level. Half of all top officials must be women: all new ones had to be under the age of 35 when they took office. The place was alive and enthusiastic. Would we like to set up a University with them? We could build it and get the profits for 10 years. They would then take over. We asked what we liked and learnt about everything from family-planning to the attitude to the former Japanese occupiers.

There was no unusual diet or particularly unhygienic behaviour; no obvious cunning or cheating; little evidence of corruption (one case where someone had been jailed for providing bad school meals had aroused national indignation); little obsessive individualism, but a great deal of courtesy in everything from driving behaviour (disorganized but obliging), to tolerance of foreigners.

A swathe of north-east China into the badlands of Manchuria had revealed from top to bottom a great rush of change which was proceeding in a pretty orderly and collaborative way. There was little obvious unemployment or poverty, scarcely any beggars, no obvious heavy police or army presence. Indeed there was a distinctly critical attitude to the aged leaders as well as a lack of interest in central government. Compared to extensive travels I have made in India, Nepal, Japan and Europe, it was an invigorating picture.

Some of the friends I told about the trip when we returned wisely explained that China was a huge place with vast regional variations. Just because the North-East was not like some representations meant little. Elsewhere we would find the ecological

destruction, gross inequalities and political repression characteristic of a civilization which did not enjoy the wonders of western freedom and democracy. But how were we to continue our burrowing without the help of someone like James Lee?

2003: travels to the middle and south-west.

I have for many years wanted to travel to south-west China and particularly Yunnan. It is famous for its many ethnic minorities and I had worked in adjacent and overlapping cultures in Assam and Nepal. My grand-father had helped map the border between Burma and Yunnan and learnt Yunnanese. So I was waiting for an opportunity to cut in the diagonal direction opposite to Manchuria.

In 2002 I started to teach a Chinese student, Xiaoxiao Yan, with a view to her subsequently undertaking a Ph.D. in Cambridge on the impact of broadband in China. Xiaoxiao agreed to arrange a trip which would take us along the line of her relatives.

Starting in her flat in Beijing, where we would launch the first Chinese translation of one of my books at the oldest press in China (Commercial Press – the book on Glass), we would then move to the Chicago of China, the greatest commercial centre of Chinese civilization for many centuries at Wuhan on the Yangtze. There her father and extended family lived and we would stay with them and see life in the great Chinese city port, partly occupied by the British concession at Hankow. From there we would travel to the flooded ‘Three Gorges’ on the Yangtze river and travel through them by boat.

Then we would move on to Yunnan for a fortnight, exploring the other extreme tip from Beijing, again staying with her cousins and travelling up into remote areas inhabited by the ethnic minorities and ending up at Shangri-La, before going to the other extreme of the most go-ahead city in China, Shanghai.

This plan gave maximum chances of uncovering the real China behind the tourist and propaganda mask. I would talk to many experts who had spent their life studying China. I would lecture at several of the top Universities at Peking, Wuhan and Yunnan and talk to academics. Through Xiaoxiao’s previous contacts from a time in the media, we would meet the top Chinese documentary film maker and several people in software development companies.

But we would also spend much time with ordinary folk, whether in the Bank-owned flat in Beijing, family homes in old Hankow, or the cousin in Yunnan. We would have no ‘minders’, no special permissions were necessary for filming or travelling. We could film and photograph what we liked and ask what occurred to us, travelling with a young trainee anthropologist as our interpreter and guide.

Beijing for four days.

So we set out and spent four rushed days in Beijing. Although the first shock of what has happened to turn this into a sophisticated first-world city had been already experienced on our visit the year before, we were again impressed by the sophistication and wealth of the city. It easily rivals any great Japanese or western city in its amenities. We travelled through other parts of this great city, and again could

not find much evidence of a hidden underside. The newsagents had no pornographic or even mildly seductive magazines. They are banned, and in any case no-one seemed particularly interested in the sort of thing found in every large railway station in America or Britain. What smuggling of banned magazines there is of banned martial arts magazines.

The nearest we could find to prostitution were numerous shops selling sex aids. But these were not the devices now familiar in the west, but herbal remedies to encourage virility and sexuality. There were no obvious red-light districts and enquiries here and elsewhere suggested that prostitution is less of a phenomenon than in many parts of the world.

There were very few beggars. Almost everywhere the streets and buildings were clean and efficient. Private flats were often luxurious. The only down-side was a lot of dust in the air from construction (though far less than three or four years ago we were told, when many trees had died). Also there was a growing crisis in the water supply (new canals to deliver water are being built). And of course traffic congestion with the large and luxurious cars which many can now afford. Wages are still something like a tenth of what they are in the west, but so are costs.

Wuhan and the Three Gorges.

We spent two days in the city with Xiaoxiao's family and two days travelling up the Yangtze. We met many relatives, from Xiaoxiao's grandmother of 84 to little nephews and babies. We talked and filmed many aspects of life in private homes and the streets. We wandered along the famous 'Bund' or embankment of the Chinese concession, with its pavement artists writing transient poems about the moon with water on stone (for free), and the romantic lights and music. We visited the famous night-life street with its midnight eating and music. We wandered the last of the old streets which give a picture of the bustling life in this great city (larger in area than London), as it was in the 1930's.

The great British buildings nestle behind new emporia and amazing sky-scrapers. We travelled around a large new economic development zone and asked about wages and conditions in this area. The workers are paid a small amount by western standards, but a good deal more than they would be in wholly Chinese owned factories. There is reputedly insurance, medical facilities, almost free housing and food, annual contracts. We would need to inspect the actual factories, but certainly if they were like the ones we had visited in Liaoning, they are far from the grisly abodes described in some journalistic accounts. On the outside, everything is as spotless and efficient looking as a Cambridge Science Park.

Up the Yangtze we saw little boats and scenes that evoked the centuries when people toiled up and down this great river carrying tea, salt and other goods back and forth. They hauled the barges on treacherous cliff paths and along wooden walkways on the cliffs. The world described by Isabella Bird so wonderfully in the 1890's has now left just a few last traces after the rise of the river by over 140 metres since the dams were built.

On our trip there was always the insistent dilemma. The largest dam in the world (3 miles across) lifting the water finally 175 metres or nearly 600 feet over a stretch of many miles has drowned so much; something like 10 per cent of all archaeological remains in China, up to 2 million people displaced. On the other side it will contribute, we were told, up to half of all China's electricity needs in the future and provide a great boost to the development of the poorest provinces of the middle West. Millions will benefit, millions are displaced. And a life of almost unbearable toil which gave occupation to many has been swept away. It is not an easy equation. Nor is it easy to decide how much coercion and compensation there has been.

Undoubtedly it was a choice, like the building of new runways and motorways in Britain, taken against local wishes. Until recently development in China has not been much impeded by even the flimsy planning consultation and protections in the U.K. But in September 2003 a new act has been passed (after some farmers set themselves alight in a demonstration in Beijing) which ensures that in future all schemes which involve displacing people or injuring their properties must go through consultation and agreement.

We heard this last fact from a Professor of Sociology at Wuhan who also told us of a new act that states that whereas in the past people could be put in detention camps to await trial for long periods on suspicion, henceforth if a formal charge is not made within 24 hours they must be released. The irony of this when in America and Britain the inherited rights of western citizens are being rapidly eroded is not lost on Chinese scholars. But I never expected to hear, from the lips of this same Professor (who has travelled very extensively all over Europe, East Asia and the U.S. for years) the following words: 'In America they have a lot of problems in terms of human rights'.

I heard him explain how new legislation has been passed which states that local government is now obliged to provide food, housing and work for any homeless or jobless people in its area, and I thought back to the growing number of homeless I had seen in Cambridge. I began to grow increasingly confused.

When I challenged the Professor about the absence of democracy, he said that democracy was easing its way forward in numerous small ways, a thousand small incidents and changes every day. And as we read the evening paper on the plane the next day, we discovered that elected neighbourhood councils were being tried out in the cities to decide all local planning. They had long been present in the villages (as we had seen in Liaoning), but now were spreading to Beijing and other cities. I realized this was one example of what he meant – democracy from the grass roots upwards.

There was no obvious vice or crime and questions about this had not raised any suggestions of a problem. Most of those we saw and talked to were cheerful and optimistic. Most notable was the curiosity, energy and breadth of knowledge of the young people. I gave a talk at Xiaoxiao's old school to about eighty 16-18 year old children. They asked fascinating questions and we saw the excellent facilities of the school, including broadband internet access and the library. Most revealing were the questions which they wrote down for me. Many of the broadest 'Meaning of Life' questions were asked, many about love, friendship and family. The standard of

English was excellent, even though we were told that this was not the very best school in this city.

Many of the questions were about Harry Potter, including, indirectly, one student wanting to know if I could introduce him to an English sorcerer. A number were very thoughtful and pointed – why was China so negatively portrayed in the west, what was the point of the endless obsession with accumulation in capitalism etc?

The thirst for knowledge, the vast wealth of English-language materials in the shops of even small towns, the joint ventures, the new computers made in China, all suggest an intellectual deluge and with over two and a half million graduates from the Universities each year, no shortage of educated talent. With present trends, according to experts I consulted, within ten years most electronic goods in the world will be made in China. I suspect that within twenty years, with the input from joint ventures from leading British and European firms such as Siemens and the return of increasing numbers of science graduates, many of the technical advances in the world will occur in China.

Our heads were buzzing with the excitement of the streets, schools and universities, our hearts flooded by the kindness and warmth of Xiaoxiao's family and many ordinary Chinese when we left. There are, of course, many problems. Too much pressure on exams, too much traffic, too much rubbish on TV (usually, though, quite high quality historical epic rubbish), too much gorging on fish and meat. But not, as far as we could see, much more. No obvious repression (we hardly saw a policeman and no troops and were never obviously watched). No obvious deceit. Little filth.

Yunnan and the south west

We then went for two weeks to Yunnan, the most south-westerly of China's provinces, at the exact opposite extreme to Manchuria. With a land mass larger than Britain or Burma and about 40 million inhabitants it would make a respectable European nation.

It is known that Chairman Mao tried to suppress the culture of the various ethnic groups in this area (half of all the ethnic groups in China are in Yunnan along the borders of Thailand, Burma and Tibet). It is an important place to examine some of the traditional anthropological problems of the assimilation and treatment of minorities.

A visit to the various University departments in Yunnan University, where we were told of impressive efforts to document, represent and encourage the local cultures of the minorities suggested that the government attitude to the minorities had changed greatly. Anthropology, seen as the way to understand and treat with care the minority peoples, is the most highly rated of all disciplines in Yunnanese universities.

After a few days in Kunming the capital, we spent the rest of the time in various minority areas. We visited three of the minorities (the Naxi or Nakhi, the Moso or Mosuo and the Tibetans of Shangri-La) and watched their lives and discussed through Xiaoxiao (as interpreter) with some of them. We found, on the whole, a care for minorities which is outstanding. They are encouraged to speak their own language

(although they are taught standard Mandarin in the schools). They are given economic encouragement. Local museums and places where the elders can teach and re-teach younger generations their skills are being set up.

The difficult balance between protecting minorities (if over-done turning them into human zoos) and developing so fast that everything is lost, seems to be being achieved. There is certainly much more concern and activity than I have seen in India or Nepal. In Nagaland there is one military or para-military person per member of the native population. In the minority parts of Yunnan we saw no undue police or army presence.

We were obviously on the lookout for the twin blights of the neighbouring states of Thailand and Burma, namely opium and prostitution. Yunnan borders on the 'Golden Triangle' and has a border which it is impossible to police. The notorious history of Chinese addiction (encouraged at one time by the British) would lead us to expect serious problems.

I collected quite a bit of information on these twin problems which I shall elaborate elsewhere. In a nut-shell, there is some addiction and some prostitution, particularly on the absolute border. But the city of Kunming and other cities we visited seemed relatively free of these scourges according to many we talked to. Traffickers are subject to the death penalty and some have been executed. Addicts are treated in hospital. We saw no signs of either. We were told that both problems were decreasing. Thirty years ago it was not safe to accept cigarettes from a stranger. Now it would be safe to do so.

The brothels of Bangkok are world infamous. Young girls from the tribal minorities are exploited for sex tourism. We were told that there is some of this in one or two of the towns on the border, but inland, as in Kunming, nothing much. As in Beijing and other cities, we were told, some four-star hotels had call girls. But we saw no strip clubs, no advertisements etc. It was all very demure and very different from Tokyo or London.

One representation of China since Mao is that it has become a grey and uniform place. Yunnan is a relative backwater and so we expected that it would still reveal in its architecture, streets, decorations and culture something of this sullen aspect.

We were amazed, instead, to find that the streets from the airport were beautiful – clean, full of murals and exotic lights. Likewise outside the cities and in smaller towns, there is a delightful variety of sights and sounds. We visited many wonderful tea houses and restaurants, pagodas and parks where the old men assembled with their caged singing birds.

If we compare it to the drab landscapes produced by democracy and industrialization whether in America or Britain, there can be little doubt as to which has the more varied and artistic public life. For instance, we were constantly surrounded by music – from western rock, through Chinese ballads, to folk music and we met many young people involved in making and enjoying music.

We visited the Mosuo people on the banks of the beautiful Lugu Lake. Their area is known as 'the Kingdom of Women'. It has one of the most extreme forms of matrilineal and matriarchal societies in the world. Perhaps uniquely in the world, marriage does not exist at all. Women have separate bedrooms and men visit them at night. All children belong to the women's household, and this is headed by a woman. We spent a night in one of the Moso households and filmed their morning life and a meal where they discussed their customs.

We even met a Buddhist lama nearby who spoke good English after spending 30 years in England (over ten years of them in Cambridge!). I interviewed him about the Chinese attitude to religion, treatment of the Dalai Lama and Tibetans, degree of freedom - fascinating and unexpected stuff. He was a member of one of the matrilineal families who had gone off early to Lhasa.

We then went up to Shangri-La. A rather bleak and cold place, but made fascinating by spending two nights with a Tibetan family. They, like others, had just built a huge smart house out of the proceeds of the Chinese economic boom, which has clearly reached even this remote area. We discussed many topics and again there were many surprises. The young monk in the family when asked for his views on Chairman Mao said that he was a reincarnate Buddha, of equal reverential value to the Dalai and Panchen Lama. They were brothers, and like brothers they had fallen out - hence Mao's pushing out of the old system in Tibet.

We returned by way of the charming town of Dali, where we also filmed, and Kunming where we had further talks in the University and family about current affairs. Then by plane to Shanghai.

Shanghai is indeed an extraordinary city, one of the wonders of the world. Through Xiaoxiao's contacts we met judges, business consultants, bankers and the wave of go-ahead entrepreneurs who are shaping the new China. We filmed in the streets, the amazing stores and up the tallest building in Shanghai.

During our trips of 2002 and 2003 one particularly interesting phenomenon was the spread of the internet and mobile phones. The incredibly rapid change in communications can be illustrated by the almost ubiquitous Internet cafés, in cities, small towns, and even villages. Along a quarter of a mile street in Yichang city, a medium-sized city on the Yangtze River, we came across at least ten Internet cafés. Driving down a small side street leading into the country in Shenyang in old Manchuria, there were five in a row. In a small town (Lijiang) the size of Cambridge in the remoter south western region there were more than seventy broadband Internet cafés and more than 100 ordinary Internet shops.

These places were crowded with Chinese youngsters, sending emails, chatting with friends, playing e-games, watching online films from around the world, even publishing their writings on special free websites. Many lingered on the internets for four or five hours a day.

Likewise the take-up in educational and other institutions was widespread. We found, for example, a high-speed campus network in the new university we visited in Shenyang. In the secondary school in the midland city of Wuhan, students accessed

my website in a computer room with 50 personal computers with a total broadband connection as large as that of King's College, Cambridge. In remote regions in Yunnan, local museums have internet connections. Currently China has the second largest broadband usage (10 million users) in the world after America. China Telecom predict that by the end of the year there will be 50 million users.

It was a mind-blowing experience and cast into doubt almost all that I thought I knew about the Middle Kingdom. With Xiaoxiao I have set up a web-site on which parts of the film we took can be seen (www.digitalorient.org). There you can judge for yourself something of what is happening in the largest transformation that has ever (and probably will ever) happen on this planet.

Some guesses about what is happening.

At the end of our second trip (2002) I sat down in our hotel and quickly wrote down my impressions of what is happening. I then discussed this with a number of our Chinese and American friends on the trip and they seemed, broadly, to endorse my conclusions. Clearly this is a rough set of guesses, but it may be interesting to see what an outside anthropologist who has worked extensively in Nepal, India and Japan makes of what he sees in China today. Nothing that we saw on the third trip in 2003 has undermined the force of these impressions, and now that we have extended our view from the north-west to the centre and the south-west and Shanghai, the impressions are not only re-enforced but given a wider geographical base.

In each case the cited change should be prefaced by the words, 'in China there is currently occurring a massive transformation in...'

- *standards of living and consumption*: a vast improvement in housing, clothing, food and other basic amenities. This is the most striking of all.
- *personal communications* : from wireless to television (and satellite TV), from uncertain postal service to the web (including broadband) and mobile phones
- *industrial production*: from heavy state industry to smaller, often joint-venture or privately owned, industrial firms, using modern technology and organizing labour in new ways
- *agricultural production*: from archaic technology based on human labour, to modern seeds and machines
- *economic organization*: from a command economy to a free market economy where the government hardly interferes, low tax rates etc.
- *political organization*: from a centrally dominated, surveillance, state-dependent civilization, to increasing regional autonomy, local decision making and an absence of fear
- *psychological state*: from a repression of creativity and initiative, to encouragement of it, a conceptual revolution from pessimism to optimism, from closed to open curiosity
- *international interests*: from a fortress mentality, inward-looking, nationalist, China-centred, to one where the Chinese want to become world citizens and learn from the world
- *intellectualism*: from a suspicion of intellectuals and free thought (after the Cultural Revolution) to a huge desire to educate, open Universities, encourage discussion and research

- *language*: from a situation where English was a peripheral language, to one where it is being placed at the centre of the curriculum and taught from elementary level onwards
- *transportation*: from relatively poor, rutted, roads, to a network of excellent highways and roads
- *artistic activities*: the revival of traditional art forms and celebration of the rich cultural heritage in opera, painting, ceramics, museums, temples, monuments, dance etc.
- *religious activity*: the revival of Buddhism, Christianity and many forms of what were previously regarded as ‘superstition’
- *gender relations*: women enter the public sphere, get jobs and assume status equality in social, economic and political spheres
- *kinship relations*: from wide kinship to the one-child nuclear family, which started in the 1950’s and has gathered pace, with huge implications for family structure at a wider level
- *family and personality structure*: the one-child family has altered the psychology of the young, making them more individualistic, narcissistic and competitive
- *historical time*: whereas previously the past had been systematically obliterated during the height of the Communist period, now there is a great historical revival and an interest in the long term past
- *ethnicity*: whereas during the Communist period the identity markers of ethnic groups in Yunnan, Tibet, Mongolia and elsewhere were suppressed, now they are being encouraged for tourism, heritage and to express the new freedoms and rights
- *expectations*: a ‘revolution of rising expectations’, that whereas little was possible, now people dream of changing their world and seeing their children far surpass them
- *quality of life*: whereas at first there was an aim to try to get as much food, clothing, education as possible, now there is a growing concern for quality of life expressed in higher quality education, leisure, fashion etc
- *ecological thought*: whereas for centuries the Chinese countryside has been abused and destroyed and the process reached a high level during the Communist period, now there is increasing concern to reverse this, with tree planting, closing dirty factories or zoning them etc
- *stylistic change*: originally everything Chinese was emphasized and little interest was expressed in foreign styles of living, except production technology, now clothes, make-up, cars, everything foreign and stylish is of interest

These twenty-two transformations (and no doubt there are others) are all occurring at the same time and intersecting, fuelled by Hong Kong, foreign investment and venture capital, a huge domestic market. All of this adds up to the rapid transformation of China from the closed, integrated world of the period up to 1978 to a much more open, proto-democratic, market capitalist world of predictability and modern technologies and the division of labour which Adam Smith elaborated as the basis for *The Wealth of Nations*. So China is a living example, as Japan was in the 1880’s, that the Enlightenment prescription can work. It is Smith’s ‘peace, easy taxes and a due administration of justice’.

In the process it is building a relatively fair, prosperous and optimistic society and economy which is starting to rise towards the same level as Japan, Europe and America. It does not take many years at 10% compound growth to double your GNP. And though there is some corruption and still much pollution, the transformations are being handled relatively carefully. The horrors associated with the first industrial revolution in England and later in Europe are largely being avoided. The chaotic brutality of the introduction of western capitalism and democracy after the collapse of the Soviet Union is not being repeated. Without falling over backwards in uncritical admiration, it is worth taking note of a transformation which is affecting us all and will shape our future.

Authors and acknowledgements

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