



China Briefings

By Glenn Myers

Chapter 1: The Middle Kingdom

If Engineers Ruled the Earth

On the last day of December 2002, the ribbon was cut on a new railway. Resting on thin air 15 cm above a single rail, levitated by electromagnets, trains whip between the glittering skyscrapers to make the journey from Shanghai's Pudong Airport to Shanghai's railway station in just eight minutes. This is the world's first commercial 'maglev' -a showpiece in a city of

showpieces.

It is no longer news that each year, China re-equips itself with more and more of the inventory of superpowerdom, restoring its place in the world, climbing once again to the heights.

China's national bird, so the joke goes, is the crane: at the height of its building boom Pudong was said to be home to one quarter of the entire world's flock. They are endemic in China now, patiently assembling shopping malls and apartment blocks.

The scale of construction is not for people of nervous disposition. China adds, for example, 3,000km of new expressway per year and 1,500km of new (conventional) railway. It is hoping to build 600 new cities in the first decade of this century. Other cities, it moves to make way for the Three Gorges scheme, the world's ultimate mega-dam project. The infrastructure for the 2008 Beijing Olympics is a statement of arrival a~ a world-class city. If you want to see what the whole world would be like if engineers ruled the earth (most of China's top leaders are engineers), come visit the Middle Kingdom-China's ancient name for itself-and gasp.

Every measure you can think of-infant mortality, carbon dioxide emissions, sales of soft beds, soft drinks, or soft toilet paper-records China's dramatic dash to reach developed-country standards, for good or ill. Economic growth and development in China is everything, the overriding national goal.

Deng Fever

A developed China will be Deng Xiaoping's monument. One of the twentieth century's great figures, he assumed power in 1979 as an old man (after years of being alternately given high responsibility and then purged). But with characteristic boldness and brilliance, he scrapped the high road of Communist economics that his predecessor Mao Zedong preached, and set China on the grubby path to capitalism. Despite all the predictable bad that flowed out of this (corruption, greed, repression, inequality, pollution), no political leader in history has taken more people out of poverty than Deng.

Deng's scrapping of Mao was done with due deference towards the old ancestor. Party doctrine claims it is still continuing in the course Mao set. Mao has a lavish Mausoleum (or perhaps a Mausoleum) in Tiananmen Square, and the old dictator's corpse is said to travel by lift each morning from a deep-freeze to the viewing chamber, before being reverently stowed back in the fridge each night. In the new China, even Mao commutes.

Jiang Zemin continued Deng's course after Deng's death in 1997, and Hu Jintao after him. Thus capitalism under Party control has now been pursued in China for

about as long as Maoism was pursued before it. It has brought increasing prosperity throughout the country, a fantastic achievement-feeding 22% of the world's population from only 8% of the world's farmland³, for example, or becoming ever more like the manufacturing hub for all of planet earth. China's re-emergence as a superpower, everyone seems to believe, will be one of the stories of the 21st century.

And Still Mao Looks Down

The pictures from Tiananmen Square on June 4th 1989-pro-democracy demonstrations smashed by tanks-were one of the motifs of the late 20th century. Communist structures were crumbling like cheap concrete in Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia, but in China, it was Orwellian business-as-usual: the 'People's Republic' deployed the 'People's Liberation Army' to crush the people's liberation movement.

In this, the Chinese government under Deng was restating an old theme. China may now be economically liberal. But China's leaders have always had absolute power, and in that sense nothing has changed over several thousand years. Political control, 21st century style, means, for example: 4 Internet access is being promoted across China but connection to the global internet is policed. Newspapers in China have changed dramatically in recent years, and are full of colour, variety, profiles of pop stars, advertising-everything except original, informed, critical reportage. In 2002, Party circulars warned editors off 'stories related to central leaders and their families ... Taiwan, Tibet, and East Turkistan independence; religious extremists and Falungong; the military; social stratification; the south-north water diversion project; advocacy of private ownership; taxes and fees in rural areas; student loans; human genetic research; private entrepreneurs as Party delegates; lawsuits against the government; villagers who sold blood; Forbes ranking lists; Confucian moral education in primary schools; university rankings; the Qinghai Tibet railroad; and major accidents:5 When Securities Market Weekly ran a story on how rich National People's Congress President Li Peng and his family had become, every issue was confiscated.

In stable times China never has had the alternative sources of power that in other countries are provided by warlords, parliaments, free presses, or labour or religious movements. Political opposition is still treated as 'dissent: Anything that could serve as a means to mobilise people religion, newspapers, political movements, campaigning organizations are policed, sometimes crushed, by a state whose instincts are always to control.

Even more surprising to the outside observer, the people seem to accept all this. In its overriding fear of instability and chaos, the government reflects what the bulk of the people themselves seem to believe. It has concentrated on rice, not freedom, and most Chinese people have concluded that if you have to have one overriding priority-well, you can't eat freedom.

So even without strong political control, self-restraint and self-censorship would be the norm in China. This is not an instinctively open, confrontational, critical society. It's a cautious, protective, harmony-loving society. Part of the reason, for example, the SARS virus took hold in China in early 2003 was not 'government repression' but the instinctive desire, at every level, to keep bad news within the family, save embarrassment, and put on a good face to people outside.

The Story Behind the Story

This quiet, industrious, long-suffering approach to nation-building is worth looking at a little deeper. What powers this rise-mass starvation to maglevs in half a century? Why this willingness to take casualties and accept big restrictions in the headlong dash to prosperity? It may be helpful to see it all as a pointer to the

Chinese outlook on the world. Crassly generalizing though we may be, here are a few tentative themes:

1. Greatness: To be Chinese is to belong to one of the great cultures. No civilisation has climbed higher than the heights of China's art, literature, technology, philosophy, architecture. The list of China's traditional exports is a catalogue, in the Western folk-memory, of the most exquisite luxuries: silk, jade, porcelain.

2. National pride: For the past 150 years, the Chinese have had to endure terrible scenes. Imagine if this was your nation's recent past: military defeat, foreign domination, poverty, invasion, civil war, warlordism, dictatorship, starvation, mob violence and mass murder. Any nation would be passionate about regaining its lost pride: China-a major culture, and a culture governed by ideas of shame and honour-is so supremely, and rightly.

3. Shortage: Hunger, or the folk memory of it, also tugs at the robes. Through the millennia in China there has never been enough to go round. There have been comfortable, luxurious lives available for a few; hard, bitter and deprived lives for everyone else. China is not a culture where you wait in line, in the confident hope that there is enough for everyone. China is a culture where you jostle to get what you can when you can.

4. Family: The strategy for survival has always been: (1) Rely on a close web of relationships, supremely your family. (2) Make the most of any opportunity that any family member can grab.

China is a nation that deeply embraces the principle of self-sacrifice for the greater good. Grandparents take extra jobs to buy weekend tuition for the grandchild, the passport to a job. A young mum may leave her children with her in-laws for a couple of years so that she can take a promotion in her company. She won't do this for personal career fulfilment: as a member of the extended family on whom fortune has smiled, it is her duty to grab the chance on behalf of all.

China currently attracts a lion's share of foreign investment in the world. Partly this is because China is at the moment the biggest low wage, business-friendly country on earth. But partly it is because of self-sacrifice and opportunity-seizing on a national scale.

5. Obedience and conformity: If you rely on a network of relationships for your welfare, you also have strict obligations to that network. There is a strong cultural value in China of children being 'filial' which implies putting up with, obeying, submitting to, honouring, and making prosperous the retirement of, the previous generations. It is-it could be argued-a lot nearer the Biblical ideal than the Western world's habit of abandoning the elderly to loneliness and government welfare.

This principle extends out through the culture. China is not a nation of brilliant individualists, mavericks who overthrow the status quo. Chinese art often depicts tiny people set against vast landscapes: what are individuals after all? It silently asks.

Leadership (and followership) throughout the culture reflect what Chinese people learn at their mothers' or grandmothers' knees about how families work. Dissent is feared and rebuked, not encouraged. Rulers rule.

Followers pull together, and if necessary, suffer silently or 'eat bitterness'. It is uncultural to defy family, question teachers, criticise the government: a free press is a threat to stability, a crack in the national foundations-not a sign of their strength and flexibility.

China has always had autocratic leaders and has usually had quiescent followers: that principle built the Great Wall and the Grand Canal in the past and is today building and pushing millions of people out of their homes and flooding the Three Gorges - self-sacrifice at the command of autocratic rulers, for the national good.

Only So Far

All of this takes us only so far. A land of 1.3 billion is vast and complex enough for every generalization to be proven both true and false. It is also changing, and staying the same. China overflows all analysis.

It is a land both conservative and mini-skirted; capitalist and entrepreneurial and nostalgic for socialism; it has cities of glittering office blocks and cities where, through the smog, you can view the grey lines of obsolete factories and unemployed workers. It has young children rendered myopic and obese by too much study and too many burgers; old people lean and scarred from a lifetime of hardship. It has baby girls left to die in woods; and mostly, it has masses of people muddling through. China is developing fast, but it has a vast, undeveloped hinterland. China's government attempts to control, but it is itself huge, unwieldy, and uncontrolled.

And it is, of course, changing, rapidly (but also slowly)-evolving in ways no-one can predict. Expect everything, then expect the unexpected as well.

Deng Fever and the Church

The changes since Deng have had enormous consequences for the Church-which is the story of this book. There are many ways to understand the Church in China: a sovereign work of God, for example, or a miracle-seeking mass-movement such as always happens among peasants during an era of upheaval and powerlessness (as some Western journalists and anthropologists have claimed⁸). Let's start by looking back in China, this means a long way back.

The Wild Frontiers of Capitalism

Numerous tragedies unfold on the grubby road to capitalism. Here are some examples:

In the early 1990s the government set up 200 blood donation situations in rural China, offering farmers 40 Yuan (about £3) each time. Local government TV adverts recommended selling blood as the 'road to prosperity', and a valuable supplement to farm incomes. But health and safety provisions were skimped, syringes reused, equipment not sterilized. AIDS flourished, emptying whole villages. In 1996, the government closed the centres down, but illegal ones arrived to fill the gap.

The bid for the 2000 Olympics brought out the worst in China while simultaneously trying to demonstrate the best in the world. In one horrific case, a harmless mentally handicapped man named Wang Chaoru was dragged from his home by the police lest he wander the streets and spoil the view for the Olympic Committee as they toured Beijing in 1993. After the Olympic committee left, his parents were invited to collect his body, which had been beaten to death. They were later given a bag of money to keep quiet. China lost the Olympic bid by one vote and the millennium games went to Sydney.

One of Communism's extraordinary early achievements in the early 1950s was to end the plague of opium addiction that had dogged China for more than a century. And China stayed largely drug free for several decades, despite sharing a large border with the world's leading heroin producers. But as Deng's reforms took hold

in the late 1980's, the drug trade made it's way into China via the south west of the country, and drug addiction once more became a serious issue; even on official figures the number of Chinese addicts passed 1m in 2002.