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China revisited: some personal impressions

To predict today whether the mood of China in 1975, let alone years later, will be one characterized by conventional methods of economic development and subdued political tendencies, or one of tumultuous upheaval, would be foolhardy, given the extraordinary pattern of change in the past.

William Saywell, September 1974¹

In June 1979 I returned to China for the first time since leaving a diplomatic posting there almost exactly six years earlier. At times it felt like another country – another century. China has changed. In some ways it has changed dramatically – at least on the surface. But there have been periods before when observers and analysts have written about dramatic changes unfolding, of new eras dawning, of new freedoms and more relaxed moods existing. Those periods, most notably the Hundred Flowers era of 1956, the eve of the Cultural Revolution 1964-5, and the diplomatic opening to the world of the early 1970s, have been followed by dramatic reversals in policies and political fortunes – the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and the Gang of Four. Are the changes which have been unfolding since the death of Mao and the purge of the Gang fundamentally and perhaps irrevocably altering the essential

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¹ W.G. Saywell, 'Postscript – China in the '70s,' in J.M. Gibson and D.M. Johnston, eds, *A Century of Struggle: Canadian Essays on Revolutionary China* (rev ed; Toronto 1975), p 179.

direction China will take during the remainder of this century? Or are they but a prelude, however unpredictable, to another political upheaval of 'radical' and repressive policies?

I returned from a visit to China with a host of impressions, some of which reinforce views gained by more seasoned research and analysis, others of which contradict those views. They are impressions primarily gained from a visit, but tempered by a broader perspective of continuing research on China and my earlier experience of diplomatic service in the country.

I

The first impact of how things have changed in China comes before you cross the border in Hong Kong. Twelve years ago, as a resident of this British colony, I listened daily to the detonation of dozens of communist-planted bombs, read signs in communist department stores threatening to squeeze out the last drop of 'British imperialist blood,' and listened to British army officers argue whether they could hold the colony for twenty-four or thirty-six hours against a possible Chinese attack. Today travel posters advertise package tours to a dozen Chinese cities and beauty spots at internationally competitive prices. Western tourists on their way home get photographed against the Hong Kong skyline looking ridiculous in straw peasant hats, complaining about facilities and prices, but happily talking about 'having done China'. Countless groups of Japanese faithfully follow their tour leader, flag and whistle in hand, about to leave far more foreign currency in China than any other group. At the Kowloon train station where one can now board a direct train to Guangzhou (Canton), one is jostled by countless overseas Chinese, on their way to visit relatives all over China, laden down with electric fans, tape recorders, colour television sets, and almost every other conceivable type of foreign product. The Chinese public's thirst for more and better consumer goods is a major problem for the government. It is eased somewhat by the official encouragement of visitors bringing their relatives many of these items. The Chinese not only know what items they want, they give their overseas relatives precise and well-informed instructions about the brand and model.

If the Hong Kong scene served as a prelude to my awareness of changes in China, stepping off the train in Guangzhou not to the screams of martial music or to one of Jiang Qing's revolutionary 'musical' abortions, but to the sound of Strauss – Johann – was an instant revelation.

The Chinese look to the tourist trade as a major source of foreign currency to help pay for their frenzied thrust at achieving modernization by the end of the century. They are rapidly opening new locations to foreign tourists and making major efforts to provide the kind of service and facilities that the international tourist expects. As prices for everything from travel and hotels to food, souvenirs, and antiques climb, the euphoria of a first visit to China evaporates, and more and more tourists openly express their displeasure at bureaucratic red tape and the uneven quality or lack of such expected comforts as air conditioning. The tourist may be amused by learning in Shanghai's excellent Peace Hotel that he can have a 'Peace Cocktail' or a 'Lucky Cocktail,' or in the tropical heat of beautiful Guilin (Kweilin) that there is a 'Supplication of Cold Drinks Upstairs on the 12th Floor,' but he will not be amused by the soaring prices or unacceptable service he too often encounters. If China's tourist industry is to remain an important earner of foreign currency, supporting the nation's efforts at modernization, the standard of tourist services and facilities will have to be improved.

The mad rush to modernize, known as the Four Modernizations (Industry, Agriculture, Science and Technology, Military), is obvious throughout China's cities. In the year preceding the spring of 1979, reports of new multi-million and even multi-billion dollar capital purchases from the West and especially Japan were weekly, sometimes daily, occurrences. China appeared ready to buy anything, from complete steel and petrochemical complexes, oil exploration equipment, mining machinery, heavy machinery, computers, and military hardware to Western-built hotels and foreign films. China's most proudly boasted slogan of earlier years, 'self-reliance,' became historical rhetoric, as the country appeared to be about to become one of the globe's most heavily indebted nations. Some estimated that the country's debt by the end of 1979 would be us\$30 billion. The 1979 trade deficit is now expected to be

US\$3.5 billion. 'Buy now, pay later' seemed to be the order of the day. Despite the lingering doubts of some foreign lenders about China's ability to repay on time – or at all should another political upheaval occur – most Western nations and Japan have become involved in financing China's capital imports, usually in the form of export credits and development project financing, but sometimes in cash.

In the spring of 1979 the buying spree was slowed. Orders were cancelled or placed on the back burner. Some China Watchers interpreted these restraints, along with sharp restrictions on the 'democracy' movement and on contacts with foreigners, as a clear sign of a political struggle at the top. Was the architect of China's modernization, Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping – the man who once said 'it doesn't matter whether the cat is black or white as long as it catches mice' – in trouble again? But, in this instance, the proclivity of China Watchers to interpret everything politically appears to have been ill advised.

China cooled off its shopping bonanza; it didn't put it in the deep freeze. There were probably several reasons. Obvious signs of mass discontent forced the government to pay more attention to the development of light industry and the improvement of the availability and quality of consumer goods. Workers' wages went up and peasants got higher prices for their goods; many commodities now sold in a flourishing free market. Leaders in Beijing began to suspect that greater autonomy in capital expenditures at the provincial, local, and enterprise level was leading to ill-informed decisions, redundancy, and unnecessary indebtedness. China's oil and coal industries (the major source of foreign currency from exports) were not expanding as rapidly as necessary. China's hopelessly inadequate system of statistics and underdeveloped computer technology meant that capital imports were far outreaching the country's ability to provide the necessary immediate and detailed exercise in national book-keeping. A national conference in the spring of 1979, while predictably blaming the situation on Lin Biao and the Gang of Four, more pragmatically resolved to convert China's statistical system to electronic technology. Above all, a

more detailed long-range plan, with clearly established national priorities for capital imports, was judged to be essential. Clearer targets and short-range plans were therefore approved at this spring's National People's Congress. China's thrust toward rapid modernization will continue at a more moderate and balanced pace, but its success will depend upon a high level of political stability being maintained.

II

China's modernization is not limited to the economic sector, nor is it without some disquieting side-effects. Life styles in China's cities have changed dramatically in the past six years, resulting in a much more relaxed public mood and far greater freedom in the exercise of personal taste. The examples one could give are almost endless. Walking down a Beijing street you may hear the strains of 'Moonlight Serenade' coming from a passerby's transistor radio. Billboards advertise Hong Kong-made movies with unsocialist titles like *Romance on a Bus* and old foreign-made movies such as *Lime-light* and *Jane Eyre*, while Chinese tell you they have seen contemporary films like *Death on the Nile* and *Convoy*. 'Starsky and Hutch' have nothing on some of the new movies on television (now in living colour), and in Shanghai one might catch a live televised performance of Isaac Stern playing to an enraptured Beijing audience.

Department stores are packed with buyers who appear to have no shortage of cash as they select from a wide variety of goods including Western-style dresses, blouses, and skirts. Long line ups form at the sections on foreign languages, novels, short stories, and technical subjects at bookstores, but whenever I visited one, no one seemed interested in the section on politics. Large crowds gather around photo studios displaying wedding pictures with brides in long white dresses and veils. Chinese fortunate enough to acquire tickets can sample traditional Chinese or Western ballet and opera or a superb concert that includes everything from leading artists, absent since the Cultural Revolution, singing traditional Chinese songs, to hilarious Tanzanian folk dances with performers in-

distinguishable from Africans in colour, figure, or movement. Such an evening may include a traditional Chinese number à la Romeo and Juliet except that the lovers are reunited in a romantic reincarnation.

While renewed restrictions on contact with foreigners must have soured many, there remains far greater freedom in this activity, as in others, than at any time since the early 1960s – a period to which many more seasoned travellers to China have compared it. Taxi drivers may ask you about living standards in Canada. Senior army officers (usually one's only travel companions on 'soft-class' train trips) may enquire about how much you make or the cost of goods in Hong Kong. Students eager to practise their English will stroll with you for hours, prepared to speak to you candidly about almost everything. Interviews in government offices or universities have only brief historical introductions and few references to the political rhetoric that used to absorb so much of the time.

In a nation where life styles as much as individual incomes are largely determined by party and state policies, these changes are obviously of considerable political significance. They represent the more moderate views of China's current leaders, most of whom personally suffered in the Cultural Revolution and under the Gang of Four. They also represent the pragmatism of these leaders who recognize that while there are limits on how far a socialist government can go in lifting state controls on a billion people, greater individual freedom and the confidence engendered by a more relaxed mood generally are essential to the mobilization of full public support behind the modernization movement. The leaders also realize that for decades the effort to modernize will continue to involve major personal sacrifices and frustrations created by unfulfilled ambitions unleashed by its revolution of rising expectations.

The régime has also recognized that the economic programme of development so largely dependent upon improved trade and diplomatic relations with the outside world must be facilitated by the relaxation of constraints on the activities of foreigners in China, resident diplomats, journalists, students, and visiting businessmen and tourists. In changing this policy the state can at the same time

experiment with allowing selected Chinese more direct contact with foreigners and foreign customs without risking an inundation of foreign values and fashions or uncontrolled contact between foreigners and the Chinese people generally.

Any number of examples might be used to illustrate this phenomenon. For this visitor, who remembers too well the era when virtually the only contact the foreign resident had with the Chinese was an official one, and when almost all bourgeois distractions could only be enjoyed within the foreign 'ghetto,' a night at a Beijing 'ball' was almost a traumatic experience. Admission was just over seven Canadian dollars. (I would have paid \$100.) Coca-Cola was us\$1.00. (If you wanted something stronger, your foreign currency went faster.) There must have been 300 people there – Western tourists and businessmen, resident diplomats, overseas Chinese, and local residents, but the dance floor could accommodate the crowd. A ten-piece band was playing 'Pennsylvania 6-5-0-0' with a touch that would have made Glen Miller smile with pride. As the band picked up the beat I asked a Beijing girl to dance. My partner glided around the floor like a butterfly. I made a stab at the usual dance floor patter in my pathetic Chinese. She smiled! Four hours and two dozen dances later (with attempts at disco to contemporary American tapes during the band's intermissions), I learned she had just spent that day rehearsing *Swan Lake*, for, like many of the Chinese girls there, she was a professional dancer.

For the Chinese, 'Liberation' came in 1949. For the foreign residents of Beijing and the city's teeming tourists and businessmen, it arrived thirty years later. One visitor called it China's 'fifth modernization.' A diplomatic wag remarked that instead of language training before a posting to Beijing, External Affairs should provide a crash course at Arthur Murray's, but I wouldn't recommend the change: the Chinese language will remain. Beijing balls with Chinese dancing partners may not remain, however (even though many of the Chinese there that evening were well connected). The balls, like the Friendship Stores and the International Club and coke and Kodak in some of China's hotels, are for the foreigner and a few privileged Chinese. But in a 'controlled' soci-

ety, as China remains, they are a convenience with a political significance. They provide a window on foreign customs to a select few – a window that can gradually be opened to others, or slammed shut on all.

China's leaders will have more difficulty reversing or even controlling other recent changes such as the free market which abounds everywhere. Individuals sell their own handmade goods, peasants the produce they have grown on their private plots, members of communes or their production units their surplus. If you had told me six years ago that in 1979 I could go up to one of many vendors on a Chengdu street and from a wide array of photographs of mainly Japanese movie stars buy for ten cents a photo of Gina Lollobrigida (plunging neckline and all), I would have doubted your mental stability.

Perhaps one of the greatest risks in China's modernization programme is that it will accentuate the profound gap between city and countryside. Change is coming to the rural areas, but slowly and at an insignificant rate compared with the cities. Even within the cities the privileges of the better off are more obvious, not because income differentials have increased, but with more goods to buy and a more relaxed mood in which to enjoy them, those who 'have' are generally not as reticent to show that they do.

Travelling through the countryside one often feels that time has stood still. Although the signs of modernization are increasingly obvious – electricity, irrigation, more vehicles, and less human transport – they somehow do not impinge on the poetic beauty of the land and its ageless ambiance. The difference between Shanghai and a remote countryside village appears far greater than that between Toronto and Temiskaming. The gulf has always been immense in China. If it widens it could become politically explosive.

III

The gap between country and city is not the only major problem China faces in its desperate bid to enter fully the second half of the twentieth century. The delicate balance between food production and population remains the critical determinant of whether this

society will progress rapidly or simply survive. With a population of somewhere between 950 million and one billion, the Chinese have long since given up their marxist rhetoric about the virtue of numbers and made major efforts to control its growth. While only about 15 per cent of China's land is arable, that land has had to feed over 300 million new mouths since 1957. In a lecture on modernization, Beijing radio on 14 February 1979 provided this statistic on population growth, while emphasizing that during the same years 'the acreage of arable land was reduced by 100,000,000 mou. (just under 17 million acres). The average amount of food grain distributed to each person in China is now even less than in 1957.'² In reporting the debate on population at this spring's National People's Congress, China's official news agency, Xinhua, provided the example of Yunnan province where the annual rate of increase in food production has been 1.7 per cent while population has grown at an annual rate of 2.4 per cent. The report indicated that per-capita grain distribution had dropped by 47 kilograms over the 1956 figure. Little wonder that some Chinese now refer in private conversations not only to the 'wasted' decade of the Cultural Revolution and the Gang of Four, but look back to the Great Leap of the late 1950s as the watershed between progress and political turmoil with only short respites between 1958 and 1976.

China's programmes of population control, including demographic control as well as family planning, have been far more successful in the cities than the countryside. Indeed in a few of China's major cities like Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Beijing, the current middle school population is higher than that of the primary schools, and some primary schools are actually being closed.

Until very recently China has relied on education, and moral and political suasion to encourage family planning. Now a more explicit policy of rewards and penalties has been introduced. While the principles of the policy are national, it appears that there are some local variations. The basic system was described to me as providing a bonus of 5 yuan per month (about Cdn\$3.70 or approx-

² *Summary of World Broadcasts*, British Broadcasting Corporation, FE/6047/111/14.

imately 10 per cent of a young factory worker's monthly salary) if parents have only one child. This is paid until the child is sixteen, unless a second baby is born. In the case of a second child the initial bonus is forfeited, but the parents will receive ration coupons for both children. (In China today rice, cotton, and cooking oil remain rationed.) After the second birth the state expects, but does not enforce, sterilization. Under the new policies the birth of a third child becomes economically crippling for most Chinese as the state will not for some years provide ration coupons and may dock one parent's salary by about 10 per cent.

Provincial radio broadcasts now speak of sterilization quotas having been met and most thoughtful Chinese are encouraged that, given political stability and economic growth, this new policy along with rising educational standards and free contraception will reduce further the twelve per thousand growth rate that was quoted by Guizhou provincial radio as being the national average for 1977. Xinhua reported this spring that the birth rate should drop by 1 per 1000 each year until a figure of 5 per 1000 is reached in 1985.³ It remains an uphill battle, but one clear sign of the régime's confidence (as well as an indication of its willingness to relax controls on youth generally, and its recognition that earlier customs did not work) is the reduction by about three years of the targeted marrying age, to twenty-five for men and twenty-three for women.

IV

No area of Chinese life witnessed a greater upheaval in the decade of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), or a more dramatic reversal since the downfall of the Gang of Four, than education, particularly higher education. Launched in 1966, the Cultural Revolution may well have had visionary goals in which some of the political and social ideals were appropriate for China. Attempts to diminish the growing gap between town and countryside, to elevate the respect for manual labour, to instil among urban élites a greater consciousness of their responsibility to the masses, in particular the

³ *Ibid*, FE/W1021/A/1.

peasants, and programmes such as those in the paramedical area were needed, and some may have left a positive legacy. But the Cultural Revolution more than anything else was a massive power struggle, not finally resolved until the radical Gang of Four who had risen to power in it was purged shortly after Mao's death in the autumn of 1976. Many Western scholars have been incredibly naïve in their interpretations of this period. Others, who provided less euphoric and more balanced interpretations, still often fail to see the full dimensions of its horrors.

For me, a year's residence in Beijing only partly removed the rhetoric from the reality, perhaps because that year (1972-3) was in a sense the 'false spring' of the entire decade, with its opening to the world, some relaxation of internal policies, the apparent pre-eminence of Zhou Enlai and the first rehabilitations of leaders like Deng Xiaoping who had been purged in the mid-1960s. China's 'spring' was cut short the following year as the Gang of Four launched the anti-Lin anti-Confucius campaign (now admitted by Chinese to have been simply a direct if veiled attack on the premier). Zhou Enlai's lengthy illness and death apparently left the Gang of Four with enough power to have Zhou's protégé, Deng, purged, and the movement towards more moderate policies ceased in many areas.

Today the horrors of that decade are all too apparent. The nation's leaders have openly stated that China was 'on the brink' of complete collapse. Many of the decade's problems are admitted in formal and official interviews, but the details are filled out more graphically in private conversations. The ravages of that revolutionary madness left few if any untouched. Its violence was far more protracted than even the most realistic Western reports made out. Casualties from armed conflict, torture, and physical and psychological deprivation were in the hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions.

China's intellectuals – its teachers, scientists, artists, writers, and musicians and others – went to hell and back. The scars of many remain all too visible. How can one communicate the sense of human tragedy involved? Imagine if you can the entire professoriate

of a nation without students to teach, research to do, even books to read, for five or six years. Imagine surviving for many of those years on less than Cdn\$10 a month. Imagine your apartment taken over by Red Guard leaders, your library destroyed, your family humiliated, your sanity and your life endangered. Imagine an entire nation for much of a decade being deprived of its extraordinarily talented cultural leaders; reading, seeing, or listening to little other than the infantile, culturally sterile, and intellectually puerile revolutionary ravings of Jiang Qing – a woman more despised than any figure in China's history, who did her best to deprive 900 million people of even the shreds of their rich cultural tradition as she herself wallowed in the most decadent morass of self-indulgence. Choose your favourite singers, dancers, actors, writers – and ask what life would have been like for you without them, or any like them, for a decade. Ask what life must have been like for them – deprived for so many years of their songs to sing, their dances to dance, their audiences to entertain. These millions survived and have now returned to their classrooms, their laboratories, their studies, and their stages with a sense of dignity and a passion for life. They are intent on living the life of the future, not reliving the nightmares of the past – on swallowing their bitterness and dedicating themselves to making up a lost decade not only for themselves but for their country. They have demonstrated an inner strength, a sense of perspective, and a lasting patriotism beyond my comprehension. This is the miracle now unfolding in China.

In the field of education the years of the Cultural Revolution were squandered. China's universities were closed entirely for five to six years. Some researchers did not go back to work for ten years. When the universities and institutes reopened, their policies like those in the areas of culture and the media were controlled by the radicals. Primary and middle schooling was reduced from twelve to ten years and that in the universities from five to four years in science and four to three years in arts. Students were not allowed to enter university directly from middle school, having first to spend a minimum of two years in productive labour. Only students

of worker, peasant, and army background were admitted, although the children of other classes could be admitted after the required years in the countryside allowed them to be reclassified as peasants! Admission criteria included physical fitness, political consciousness, and cultural level, but the last was not examined and political criteria and class background were paramount. Many of the students whose own education had been interrupted by the Cultural Revolution were not even middle school graduates. Once in an institution of higher learning only one-third of their time was spent on academic pursuits with the remainder divided between political study and manual labour. Faculty also spent a good deal of their time in these pursuits, rewriting teaching materials to correspond to the new line, and putting up with hundreds of young new instructors totally unequipped to teach in a university. While senior administrators began to regain some authority, power rested with the political authorities in the universities' revolutionary committees.

Since 1977 this educational system has been stood on its head and spun around 180 degrees. Perhaps no change is more politically significant in the long run. College entrance examinations were revived in 1977. Today, while one's physical fitness and political record (basically a character reference from a student's middle school) remain criteria for admission, essentially all China's university students are chosen strictly on the basis of their marks in the college entrance exams. The system is fiercely competitive. In 1978 close to 6,900,000 young people attempted the national college entrance exam, vying for the 400,000 freshmen positions available. This year as the age limit dropped to twenty-five (it is likely to go down to twenty-three in the near future) 4.6 million candidates competed for 270,000 to 300,000 positions. But for millions of gifted, intelligent Chinese youths who hoped to enter university just as the Cultural Revolution closed the schools, life has passed by. 'I must be content with being a worker,' said one 27-year-old man to me, 'though my father was a doctor and I had hoped to be one too. I am too old now. What else can I say?'

The universities are now run by senior academic administrators

under the general supervision of a party committee. In most places there is considerable overlap between the two. The length of the courses has been extended to four years and several universities in the science area are seeking, and will likely receive, approval for a five-year course. The ministry of education is also actively considering the question of reviving the twelve-year primary and middle school period.

Once admitted, students in China's universities now get on with the job of learning with little political interruption and only a total of four or five weeks' light physical work to be done at some point in their four years at the university. Foreign-language study is mandatory, libraries empty for years are full, teachers are desperately attempting to catch up with the literature and research in their fields from the outside world. Thousands of Chinese intellectuals, particularly doctors, scientists, and engineers, are being sent abroad for one- and two-year periods of study and research.

Perhaps the most significant change in the educational field at all levels has been the introduction of the 'key' school and university system. At each level the state has designated the best schools 'key' schools, and to these go the best resources, equipment, teachers, and students. Entrance to them, even at the primary school level, is only by examination. In the field of higher education there were eighty-nine such designated institutions in June 1979. Only those getting the highest marks in the college entrance exams are admitted to China's Ivy League. The key schools are responsible directly to the ministry of education, or other ministries, academies, or leading government units.

The new educational system gives priority to quality, with a particular emphasis on those areas of study like science and engineering more directly related to China's modernization programme. I suggested to a group of university teachers and administrators in one key university that China was developing an educational system far more élitist than anything in the West. I argued that it could not help but have a profound and bourgeois impact on society generally as time went on. The reaction, first of silence then of amused and animated debate amongst themselves, led to a denial

that this would be so. The response emphasized that China must have quality education to modernize and that, through the key school structure, the nation's best educational institutions could raise the level of the entire country by serving as models, in particular by training the teachers for the other institutions. How could I call it *élitist*, I was asked, when university professors in China have had no salary increase since 1956?! But if the educational policies and system with its key schools and universities and its thousands of students and staff going abroad continue for a decade or so, there cannot help but be a profound impact on the future path of China's social development. This is one of the great risks or opportunities, depending upon one's own ideological perspective, that China now faces. The historian of China cannot help but recall that the revolutionary leaders who overthrew China's last dynasty in 1911 came from those who had studied and travelled overseas or graduated from the nation's modern schools established in the reform movement of that dynasty.

There are other and more immediate challenges to the Chinese leadership from the nation's youth. Will those who did not quite make it through the examination system be content with lifetime jobs assigned to them that, at least psychologically, they will be less prepared to accept? Will those school leavers in China's cities or graduates who cannot find work accept a permanent transfer to the countryside? Since the Cultural Revolution some seventeen million Chinese youth have been sent to the countryside. Most of those who speak to you about their experience hated it. The receiving peasant villages were no more enthusiastic about the system. Hundreds of thousands now linger in China's major cities, refusing to go back despite government appeals and the economic hardship they inflict on their parents because they have neither jobs nor ration coupons. The government is obviously reviewing its youth policy. Far fewer urban youth will be sent to the countryside in the future, and those who go will either return after one or two years, or work on state farms where salaries are provided and conditions and facilities improved. But the problem of an immense population of young people, some desperately frustrated by their 'near

miss' in the examination system, others unemployed or underemployed and eager to stay in China's cities, will remain one of the great challenges to China's leadership for many years to come. Potentially it may well represent the most politically volatile factor in China's political future. Only rapid economic development with the creation of new jobs, and a declining birth rate, will solve it.

v

Today China appears to be politically stable. But it needs a generation of political stability to develop its programmes of modernization. Political stability will not mean that the nation's politics will be without their zigs and zags, ups and downs, disappearances and reappearances of individual political leaders. It will also involve apparently contradictory policies representative of both the swings in individual fortunes and the essential experimentation with both policy formulations and implementation. Political stability will also involve fluctuations in the controls exercised by the state on its people's life styles and freedoms. The government cannot afford suddenly to provide its people with the kind of democratic rights and privileges Westerners take for granted. An immense, underdeveloped nation of a billion people struggling to enter the mainstream of the modern world will continue for some time to make the distinctions it does between bourgeois and socialist democratic rights. In almost every walk of life a degree of state control that the Westerner would find intolerable and the Chinese will find increasingly difficult to accept will remain an essential feature of the Chinese political system. But if moderate leadership and political stability continue there is hope that this control will not again become massive repression. Rather it may be made more sensitive to human rights by the gradual institutionalization of reforms like those approved by this year's National People's Congress in a new draft law code and new electoral procedures. In observing this there is some room for cautious optimism; none for euphoria.

The current Chinese leadership, and indeed the people generally, are fortunate in at least one respect. Thanks to the Gang of Four they have the luxury of being able to dismantle many of

Mao's policies without attacking him directly. No doubt the party's policy on Mao is still being debated. His personality cult has been diminished, his fallibility stressed. Most surely feel he held on to power at least ten years too long; many, that it was really twenty years. But his great achievement as the revolutionary leader who brought this nation its liberation, its national freedom, and its dignity, need not be destroyed (though one day it might be) by a general de-Maoification, as long as there are others to blame for the failures of the past.

As Mao is brought down to size and placed in better historical perspective, the role of other leaders is being more accurately portrayed. The limelight recently given the widow of Liu Shaoqi, Wang Guangmei, is undoubtedly a prelude to the former president's own posthumous rehabilitation. Mao's major critic of the Great Leap Forward, Peng Dehuai, purged in 1959, has already been rehabilitated as have many others of lesser fame. The Chinese people's real hero is the late Premier Zhou Enlai. His greatness was of olympian proportions. His death in 1976 sparked an outpouring of spontaneous mass grief unparalleled in the Chinese experience. Almost alone Zhou saved the nation from those who came so perilously close to destroying it during the last decade of his life. I fear that the profound respect of the Chinese people for the true greatness of this man may one day be prostituted by political opportunists eager to design and then exploit a Zhou Enlai personality cult. This would be obscene. Let the man's true greatness stand alone – it needs no props.

And what of the future? One returns from China with an overall sense that the Chinese people themselves have a quiet but qualified confidence in it. Some returning overseas Chinese admit that they are apprehensive that this may only be a false if protracted spring. But inside China, if the individual comments of a few dozen Chinese in different parts of the country and different walks of life are worth anything at all, one senses that the mood is optimistic. I challenged all who told me they were optimistic by pointing to the past – to other periods of optimism, recovery, and relaxation that were followed by political upheaval and repression. I argued

with interpreters, army officers, intellectuals, and workers that another 'gang' of radical leaders could emerge. The response may have been naïve, but it was genuine and uniform. It went something like this: 'No it would not happen. China has suffered too much and learned too much. We must modernize quickly. It is our last chance.' But what, I persisted, is different now? The best answer and the one that summed up what others tried to say, or wouldn't say, was: 'the myth of infallibility has been smashed.' In a word: Mao has gone.

I did not hesitate to ask almost everyone I met on a one-to-one basis who the most important man in China is today. Few offered any hesitation or qualification to their answer – Deng Xiaoping. Most believed that Chairman Hua Guofeng is genuinely anxious to 'learn from Deng and the other veteran cadres' and that his relationship with them is good. Some expressed the hope that Hua would travel to Western industrial nations as extensively as possible. Mao had never travelled beyond Moscow. One intelligent and astute Chinese insisted that first-hand contact with the West by Hua and the next generation of leaders would be the key to the kind of leadership they would provide when Deng and his ageing partners pass on, as soon they must.

If I understand my own mixed feelings about this nation and the changes that have swept it since 1973, I share some sense of this optimism. But I also have some doubts – not only about the nation's future, and its political stability, but about my own ability to understand China. China's continued political stability can only be assured by obvious and incremental economic success. But there are forces in China today that would be prepared to unleash political turmoil and re-route China along a more isolationist and politically oppressive path.

Foreign residents of Beijing can point to any number of incidents that reveal the survival of these forces. In a short visit, one such incident above all reminded me with an extraordinary emotional impact. I had left my hotel in Hankou to take an after dinner stroll in the neighbourhood. I got no more than a few yards from the hotel entrance when a good natured crowd, mainly children,

surrounded me, some practising their English, some joining me in singing 'Do Re Mi' – the song *Sound of Music* has made famous in China – all of us joking and laughing. A middle-aged man passed by on his bicycle, stopped, and said: 'You should go rest.' I replied that I was not tired. When he repeated his 'suggestion,' I asked him why I should rest. He insisted that 'I *must* rest.' He left. But shortly thereafter a young man from the hotel came out to demand that I come in. As I stood talking to him in the lobby, a well-dressed middle-aged man, clearly the cadre in charge who had ordered my return, glared at me, saying nothing. Until a combination of fear and my own better judgment prevailed, I insisted on knowing what I had done wrong. The absurd answer I received was that it was because 'you are a teacher and the level of the children's knowledge is not so high.' An inconsequential incident? Yes, in the sense that it was an isolated incident in no way representative of current policy or mood. No, if one allows it to serve as a reminder that former political currents and moods linger beneath the surface, eager to come, and perhaps not incapable of once again coming, to the top.

It was a different set of emotions that overwhelmed me a few days later as I stood talking to a crowd, mainly of teenagers, on Shanghai's Bund. An elderly man, poorly dressed and obviously nervous, approached me and attempted to make out the 'Jamaica' crest on the tennis shirt I was wearing. At last he asked 'I beg to request your pardon. From what country do you come?' He spoke with the most elegant English accent, Edwardian vocabulary and turn of phrase. He apologized for his English, and continued the conversation in even more polished French until my own inability in that language became obvious. He then said that his best language was German. I had no reason to doubt him, for his handbag was full of Chinese textbooks on the German language and he told me that the next day he would begin to teach German at the government's request. Retired for several years he was excited beyond words at the prospect before him. He was 73. He had begun work as an apprentice in an English firm in Shanghai and had worked later for both French and German businesses.

As I left him I reflected on what that man had seen during his lifetime. He had been born during the last dynasty, could remember the revolution in 1911, may have participated in the student demonstrations of the May Fourth Movement in 1919. Like China, he survived warlords, Chiang Kai-shek's 1927 bloodbath against the communists and workers in Shanghai, the Japanese war and brutal occupation, the final battles of the civil war. He has lived through countless campaigns against this and for that. His hopes must have flourished with the Hundred Flowers period and been dashed on the repression that followed. He must have silently laughed at some of the absurdities of the Great Leap and gone hungry in the dreadful years that followed. He was certainly harangued and perhaps beaten by teenage Red Guard fanatics in the Cultural Revolution. He has seen foreigners come in gun boats, expelled on steamships, and return in jets.

What more will he see in the few years remaining to him? Political change occurs quickly in China. He knows that. The sense of purpose, progress, and political peace that he undoubtedly cherishes today could be shattered tomorrow. He knows that. That the odds are probably against that happening and that he has a renewed sense of individual worth are enough – for the moment.

The problems facing China today are enormous. A billion people must be directed along a path of economic development heavily dependent upon expensive foreign technology and capital imports and increasingly sensitive to international financial and economic trends. That development will almost inevitably accentuate the differences between urban and rural China. That in turn must be mitigated by increased state prices for agricultural products and even greater access to a free market. Combined with wage increases to industrial workers and a realistic level of response to the nation's demand for consumer goods and a better life generally, fewer funds will be available for the modernization of China's heavy industry. This will not only slow down the overall rate of economic development but will make it increasingly difficult to control the dangers of the newly emerging force of inflation.

Changes in the country's educational system will continue to

leave many of China's youth frustrated, while those who graduate from the country's universities and study overseas may emerge as a new intellectual and technological élite with values and ideals at odds with the fundamental political system and the beliefs of an older generation of political leaders, however 'moderate' or 'pragmatic' that particular group may now be.

The state has no alternative to exercising a high degree of control over its people. But the masses in turn will be increasingly sensitive to the point at which 'control' becomes repression. It will take years of consistent adherence to the assurances of improved human rights and the institutional and legal guarantees now slowly being introduced before the Chinese will be confident that the new direction post-Mao China seems to be taking is relatively secure. It will take at least a generation of economic success, political stability, and the continued institutionalization of these and further guarantees protecting human rights before that new direction will have any protection at all against a rapid reversal of policy and a renewed onslaught of political repression.

And even with the most optimistic interpretation of these and other developments one still comes up against the fragile base upon which everything else rests – the extraordinarily sensitive balance between increased food production and the rate at which China's population growth can be decreased. Here too there is room for optimism. But here, more than anywhere, time is not on China's side.