CHINA AT FIFTY
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Old friend is a significant term in China and I am happy that I am often referred to as one. Old friend does not mean, however, that one is uncritical. No, old friend means that one can be frank and constructive in one’s comments without giving offence. I trust that my words will be taken in this vein.

For foreigners, Westerners in particular, China has been a mirror that makes us uncomfortable. Uncomfortable, because China represents a different way of doing things that has challenged us to justify our own approaches. Over the centuries we have actively sought to change China, finding China’s self-centered cultural contentment strangely unsettling. We have hoped that China would adopt our ways, thus proving their universality. But China has not, frequently saying that it is content to be left alone, something that we have found even more maddening. Some find Chinese indifference to be a threat.

The history of the last couple of centuries with regard to China can be encapsulated by some quotations from famous people. Whether he actually said it or not, Napoleon is credited with: “Let the Chinese Dragon sleep for when she awakes she will astonish the world.” Many times since, various writers have proclaimed that Napoleon’s dragon is waking up, and most certainly by now, Napoleon is being proven prescient.

Some found in Napoleon’s attributed words, an implied danger. Lord Palmerston, some time British Foreign Minister and Prime Minister, in mid-nineteenth century between Opium Wars, said: “The Time is fast coming when we shall be obliged to strike another Blow in China. ...These half-civilized Governments such as those in China, Portugal, Spanish America all require a Dressing every eight or ten years to keep them in order. Their Minds are too shallow to receive an Impression that will last longer than some such Period and warning is of little use. They care little for words and they must not only see the Stick but actually feel it on their Shoulders before they yield.”

These views were put into practice not only by the British, but by the French, by the Germans, by the Russians, and by the Japanese as late as the nineteen-forties. They are still alive and well today, witness the rhetoric of Pat Buchanan, Gary Bower and many others in the United States and elsewhere.

Palmerston was long in his grave when Mao Zedong proclaimed on 1 October 1949, “The Chinese people have stood up.” Unconvinced, persons like John Foster Dulles, the American Secretary of State, deemed that the Chinese should be back on their knees and engineered a trade embargo against the new People’s Republic of China, forcing the Chinese, who had just stood up, to lean to one-side, to rely on the Soviet Union.

When it became clear that Stalin was not willing to treat China as an equal, Mao called on the Chinese people to stand on both legs, to rely on themselves, to accept poverty as a virtue and class struggle as a passion. “Poverty gives rise to the desire for action and the desire for revolution,” he said, as he sought to substitute ideology for material incentives. This led him to introduce extreme measures such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. To Mao, there was strength in population.

On Mao’s death, a different point of view, one that had always been present, but rarely dominant under Mao, was expressed by Deng Xiaoping. He put a stop to class warfare for the sake of class war, declaring that it was not the colour of a cat, but its ability to catch mice that was of paramount importance. He went further to state that ‘to get rich is glorious’ and thus he woke Napoleon’s dragon.

Footnote: The Great Leap Forward covered a period of roughly four years, 1958-62; the Cultural Revolution covered a period of ten years, 1969-76.
Two more quotes will be sufficient for this eccentric introduction. While Napoleon had foresight, General Charles de Gaulle exhibited supreme wisdom. He showed a more profound appreciation of the Chinese circumstance than any of his contemporaries when he told his newly appointed Ambassador in 1964: “Remember, Mr. Ambassador, China is a very large country, full of Chinese.”

How many people both outside and inside China have lost sight of this simplest of truths, as they seek to characterize the most populous nation on earth in stark black and white terms. We continue to measure China with the yardstick of our own ignorance. This trait comes out in such exclamations as: “But I thought all Chinese ate rice!” “All Chinese are supposed to be short, aren’t they?” “Why did the Chinese change the name of their capital from Peking to Beijing?” And such is our faith in the authoritarian nature of the Chinese government that we believe it can guarantee the future.

When, in 1984, Mr. Deng Xiaoping said that Hong Kong would remain the same for fifty years, it was accepted not only as a guarantee, but as an ironclad contract. We would scoff at such predictions or offers if made by our own governments, but when it comes to China, we feel we need to put it in a box of our own making. If the most recent of Gallup Polls’ taken in China does nothing else except reinforce de Gaulle’s wisdom, it will have done a great deal to increase mutual understanding.

Finally, I come to the 1938 Nobel laureate in literature, Pearl Sydenstricker Buck whose wisdom on China is exemplified in the following: “Nothing and no one can destroy the Chinese people. They are relentless survivors. They are the oldest civilized people on earth. Their civilization passes through phases but its basic characteristics remain the same. They yield, they bend to the wind, but they never break.”

As everyone knows, China, the People’s Republic of, celebrated its fiftieth anniversary earlier this month on October 1st. Fifty is not a great age for Chinese regimes, if one looks at the vast stretch of Chinese history, but there have been shorter periods that have transformed China in significant ways, which invite comparison.

In fact, when the People’s Republic was barely ten years old, one highly respected and influential English sinologue declared that Mao’s revolution was responsible for the greatest transformation of China since the third century B.C. and the short-lived Qin Dynasty whose first emperor linked up the Great Wall, buried scholars alive, condemned Confucius and his writings, unified the written script, standardized cart axles and built roads and dams. Mao Zedong, who reunited most of the old imperial holdings, brain-washed scholars, condemned Confucius and his writings, simplified the written script, standardized railroads, built roads and dams, was happy to be compared to the first Emperor, Qin Shihuang.

But Mao died 23 years ago, nearly 27 years after he founded the People’s Republic, and just as Confucianism was revived after the death of the first emperor, Confucianism has enjoyed a revival following the demise of Mao. In looking at China at fifty, then, one has to keep glancing over one’s shoulder at the centuries of development that came before 1949 and which contribute to the current phase of “Socialism with Chinese characteristics.”

China at fifty continues to select from its own rich experience and from that which appears to be suitable from abroad, in its effort to find the best way to govern a country of 1.3 billion persons. No government in human history has faced such a challenge, although India, by 2035, will be in that position. For Canadians,

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1 The third Gallup poll on Chinese consumers and their attitudes was released in September 1999. Some of its initial results appeared in *Fortune Magazine*, October 11, 1999.

2 C.P. Fitzgerald, Professor of Far Eastern History at Australian National University, Canberra, in a public lecture at the University of Alberta, February, 1962.
living in a country slightly larger than China with only one-fortieth of the population, such a challenge is inconceivable. But China and Chinese governments have had centuries of practice. After all, China had twice the current population of Canada, two thousand years ago.

Some idea of the task China faces might be gained if we think of a province of Alberta of at least 120 million people, 100 million of whom live in rural areas, with seven or so million residents in each of Calgary and Edmonton, and the remaining six million spread among Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, Red Deer, Fort McMurray, etc. While our current approaches to government and social organization would provide guidelines, I dare say that we might be seeking solutions to our problems well outside our current thinking, and find suggestions offered by others without the same problems, interesting, but not necessarily relevant.

In the fifty years of the People’s Republic of China, the Chinese have tried a number of solutions: some have been disastrous, others have been successful. The trick for the future is to avoid disasters and to build on the successes. Inevitably when looking at China at fifty one sees both the yin and yang and attempts to see how well these forces are in balance.

I have had some direct acquaintance of the People’s Republic of China for 35 of its 50 years. I have known it before, during, and after the Cultural Revolution; during and after the years of Mao, Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, and other veterans of the earlier struggles of the Communist Party. My first visit, in June of 1964, was at a time when China was just coming out of the disasters of the Great Leap Forward and three years of agricultural failure.

The first five years of the Revolution had been very impressive, powered by nationalism, Marxist-Leninism, and an insatiable enthusiasm to rebuild a country that had been battered by a century of rebellions, foreign and civil wars. There was hyperinflation, epidemics, wrecked communications, and other misfortunes that had to be overcome. Drug addiction, prostitution, thievery, corruption marred society. Above all, land had to be redistributed from the landlords to the peasants who had been burdened down by punishing rents and usurious interest rates. Furthermore, the young republic found itself threatened by war in Korea, which it entered despite the possible grave consequences.

The Communist leadership faced all these problems and bested them. The oft employed term Liberation is a good one for what happened, as China liberated itself from inflation, disease, social ills, and external threats. The second five years, however, brought with them hardship and disillusionment, as enthusiasm for the revolution was no longer considered to be enough, one’s political redness was more important.

The China I first met in its fifteenth year was beleaguered and very poor. Revolutionary ardor among the young was high and it had even been restored, somewhat among the older generations as Deng Xiaoping and Liu Shaoqi brought some modicum of order to the economy following the Great Leap Forward. It was made clear to me through conversations with middle rank officials, whom I met in Beijing and Shanghai, that there was a growing interest among some of the leaders for an opening up of China to the West. Indeed, that spring, France and China had exchanged recognition. I had traveled on the train to Beijing with the first members of the French Embassy. The recognition by France was seen as a first step, and I was questioned closely on

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*Strictly speaking, the Great Leap Forward applied to industry: the People’s Communes Movement dealt with agriculture.

Liu Shaoqi was President of the Republic and Deng, at that time, was Party Secretary. They are credited with reintroducing some modest material incentives and modifying the commune system to ease the hardships caused by the Great Leap. They were later condemned during the Cultural Revolution as the Number One and Number Two Capitalist Roaders for these policies. Although later vindicated, Liu died in 1969 still in disgrace.
what I thought American intentions were regarding Taiwan and Vietnam.

It was also clear to me that other forces were at work. On the train from Guangzhou, in my compartment, was an opera star on her way to Beijing to attend a conference on the performing arts; a conference that was to lay the groundwork for the proletarianization of Chinese opera. The trend was already visible on the stage as play after play explored the themes of worker and peasant struggles, the war against Japan, and the history of the Communist Party.

In the schools, the Socialist Education Movement was taking hold and the concept of part-work part-study, dear to Mao who dreaded the emergence of an effete elite, was being experimented with. Not knowing the significance of these movements, I made plans while I was in China to return during my Sabbatical Leave (1967-68) to do research. I was told that I would be welcome.

It was not to be. My attempts to return to China in 1967-68 were stymied by the events of the Cultural Revolution. In the late summer of 1967 the China International Travel Service ceased to issue visas. Chinese diplomats abroad began to do extraordinary things, such as fight London policemen with baseball bats and dustbin lids, in order to prove their revolutionary zeal to the leaders of the Cultural Revolution back home.

Thwarted in my efforts to visit China, I went around it, eventually crossing the Soviet Union on the Trans-Siberian railroad. There had already been some clashes on the border and the Soviets were beside themselves with the threat they faced from the unpredictable and mad Chinese. They rejected all other explanations for the Cultural Revolution. It was simply a movement against the Soviet Union, nothing more and certainly nothing less.

In 1973 I returned to China, this time as at diplomat at the Canadian Embassy, in charge of Cultural Affairs. The most physically violent phase of the Cultural Revolution was over. In fact, the Party had declared in the spring of 1969 that the Cultural Revolution had succeeded in its goals. As if to confirm Soviet suspicions, China now reached out to the West, recognizing Canada in October of 1970, and hosting Richard Nixon in February 1972, in an era that was known as ping-pong diplomacy. This prompted one American humorist to quip: "People who tell you that ping pong is their national game, will tell you anything!"

Despite the proclaimed victory of the Cultural Revolution, and despite the fact many class enemies were in jail or in the countryside, in 1973, the number two capitalist roader and major target of the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping was rehabilitated. Once again it looked as though forces were developing to open China to foreign trade, development and investment. As Zhou En-lai, put it: "China is an attractive piece of meat coveted by all...but very tough, and for years no one has been asked to bite into it." Zhou was to be frustrated in his efforts to make it more palatable by those, later known as the Gang of Four, who had emerged as power holders during the Cultural Revolution.

Efforts at opening up the country were ridiculed and countered by an ideological campaign known as Criticize Lin Biao, Criticize Confucius. As Cultural Counselor I witnessed this struggle first hand. Things agreed to by Premier Zhou and Prime Minister Trudeau during the

"The Cultural Revolution Group, later known as the Gang of Four, included Zhang Chunqiao, a party theoretician, Yao Wenyuan, literary critic and hack, Wang Hungwen, a handsome worker from the northeast, and Jiang Qing, one time movie actor and Mao's wife. They were later arrested, tried, and sent to prison. Jiang Qing committed suicide.

"Criticize Lin Biao was directed against the reputation and memory of Lin Biao who had been known as Mao's successor until he died mysteriously in September 1971 after an alleged plot to kill Mao and assume power. Lin was a leading figure of the Cultural Revolution and Defence Minister who worked closely with Jiang Qing. Criticize Confucius was directed against Zhou Enlai, the Premier, and his move to open up and modernize China. Zhou deflected the movement somewhat by turning it into the Criticize Lin Biao and Criticize Confucius, as evidence was said to have been found proving that Lin Biao 'worshipped' Confucius."
latter’s visit to China in October 1973, were canceled or delayed in implementation. The Vancouver Symphony could not visit because their program was considered to be too bourgeois. An exhibition of the works of the Group of Seven was unacceptable because Lauren Harris’ landscapes were too abstract. An exhibition of Chinese archaeological finds, scheduled for the Royal Ontario Museum, could only be exhibited if it carried the strict Marxist-Leninist Mao Zedong Thought interpretation laid down by Jiang Qing, the Chairman’s wife.

Life for a foreigner in China in those days was difficult, but never dull. Even the simplest visit to an historic monument had to be prefaced by a class analysis of its history. Visits to factories and to the newly re-opened universities were introduced with a description of how terrible it was before Liberation, and how the Cultural Revolution had improved things. Conversations between Canadians and Chinese always began with a discussion of the greatness of Norman Bethune.

My first impression of China when I arrived in the summer of 1973 was that nothing had changed since 1964. Conditions were still poor and revolutionary fervour appeared to be high. There was less variety in people’s clothes than in 1964 and shops were dominated by artifacts and messages from the Cultural Revolution. As far as I could tell Beijing’s skyline remained unchanged, although I later learned that underground much had been happening in anticipation of a possible attack by Russia. Shanghai and Tianjin also looked unchanged. Shanghai had been an industrial center of pre-war China, but it had been demoted. It had to take second place, or no place at all, to Daqing, the oil field in northeast China. The approved slogan was: “In industry learn from Daqing”. I thought that this surely must irk the people of Shanghai and one night, after much Maotai, the deputy mayor of Shanghai finally agreed with me.

By the time I left China in the summer of 1974, it was clear that the opening up and modernization program of Zhou was in serious trouble, largely because Zhou was rumoured to have cancer. The rumours proved true: Zhou died in January 1976 leaving Deng Xiaoping as his heir. But this was not to happen as Deng was once again condemned as the Gang of Four prepared to take over control of the country.

1976, the Year of the Dragon, was a fateful year. Not only did it see the death of Zhou, followed in early July by that of the much revered Zhu De, but later in July China was hit by the terrible earthquake at Tangshan. If that was not enough, Chairman Mao died on the 9th of September.

I returned to China early in October 1976 to find speculation rampant about the future leadership. The view of most Western experts was that the hold of the Gang of Four on power would be consolidated. It might have been the case had it not been for the head of Mao’s bodyguard who decided, instead, to arrest them, clearing the way for the eventual return of Deng Xiaoping. The streets of Beijing exploded with the news. Deng, the Monkey King had slain Jiang Qing, the White-Boned Demon. In the euphoria, everything and anything seemed possible. Well, as it turned out, everything, except democracy, and anything, except a challenge to the authority of the communist party. Nonetheless, Deng’s formula for modernization unlocked the energy and vitality of the Chinese people. No longer bound by production quotas, fixed state prices, and class criticism, people began to work for themselves as well as for the state. In education, scholars were sent abroad in an attempt to catch up for the ten lost years of the Cultural Revolution. Expertness replaced redness as the criterion for advancement in science and technology. Foreign development

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*Zhu De had led a colourful life, but was best known as the builder of the Red Army. Tangshan earthquake was the greatest in recorded Chinese history. Official figures listed nearly 250,000 dead and well over 150,000 injured.*

*The characters from the Chinese classic tale, Journey to the West, seemed to lend themselves to this comparison.*
assistance and foreign investment were welcomed, although it was to be sometime before conditions were adjusted to suit the various interests. Full scale recognition of China by the United States, begun by the Nixon visit in 1972, was completed by Jimmy Carter in 1979, as Deng made a triumphant tour of the United States. The American embargo on technology began to be eased.

On subsequent visits in the late seventies and throughout the eighties I saw the Deng revolution at work. I witnessed a growing indifference to the words of the Communist Party, and a growing involvement in material things and the struggle to acquire them. A major initiative was the creation of the Special Economic Zones. These are very much like the treaty ports of old, but rather than having foreign powers dictate the terms the Chinese are completely in control. The zones act as catalysts for the Chinese hinterland and centers for the transfer of technology. In this way, China quickly became plugged into the global economy as international corporations looked abroad for cheap labor and good conditions. China offered these, along with the prospect of entry into the world’s largest domestic market. Foreign investment came in by the billions, led by overseas Chinese entrepreneurs.

Deng’s economic miracle was not without its problems. Inflation, and worries, particularly among cultural conservatives, of negative Western influences, were but two. Construction contracts were let so fast that the buildings were often completed before they were approved. Chinese cities developed modern skylines made up of empty office buildings and shopping centers.

Deng also tackled the questions of Hong Kong, and Macau, coming up with a formula of “one country two systems” and Special Administrative Regions. In this way he wooed the British out of Hong Kong, and the Portuguese out of Macau. Reconciliation with Russia in the spring of 1989, however, was marred by the events in Tiananmen. June 1989 provided a pause in the Deng revolution, but not a halt, as levels of trade and investment were re-established not long after. Not so for Deng’s reputation abroad, and for the reputation of the Chinese Government.

Tiananmen was a tragedy, with major mistakes made on all sides. The West, particularly the Western media, however, in it desire to hold the Chinese leadership accountable, has missed an important point: the lessons that the leadership took out of the crisis. They took the students’ complaints seriously and have attempted to address them with policies designed to correct the problems. Li Peng, now with the National People’s Congress, is the only 1989 decision maker left in a central government front line position.

The transformation, however, is a very delicate and a tricky problem. In its efforts to withdraw from state operated farms and industries, in its efforts to cut back on it civil service and military, the government runs the risk of major unrest. Moreover, while overall percentages show a decrease in the proportion of the population in rural areas, the actual number of persons on the land remains nearly the same, with surplus labor from the countryside going to the cities, or more prosperous districts, looking for work. Unemployment is a major problem, so is providing for laid off state employees.

The change from the system of unit responsibility for all aspects of the life of people, ie. housing and health, to one of individual responsibility has brought uncertainty. People like the idea of finding their own homes and of owning them, but they are nervous about providing for their health and pension needs and reluctant to spend as freely on consumer goods. Yet the government requires a thriving domestic sector to create new jobs and to provide opportunities for the backlog of unemployed and the newly laid off.

The numbers of individuals involved are huge by Canadian standards and are not taken lightly. Every step in downsizing and privatizing takes major discussions. According to the Governor of
Guangdong, it is not a question of if, but when, because everyone is committed to the changes. Along with economic and administrative reform the government has been sanctioning democratic elections at the local level with parties, other than the communist, fielding candidates. In Dalian, the mayor has opened council meetings to the public. There is a desire in China for change, but for change in a way that meets Chinese conditions. Whether it be socialism with Chinese characteristics, or capitalism, Chinese style, the Chinese are determined to find their own way.

All this requires peaceful international conditions, conditions that China’s sees threatened by the bombing of the Belgrade Embassy, and the tension with Taiwan. The Chinese are as skeptical of the American explanation for the bombing in Belgrade as the Americans are of the Chinese explanation of what happened at Tiananmen.

Taiwan remains an unresolved issue on the Sino-American agenda. While each side of the Taiwan Strait jockeys to improve its negotiating position, outsiders should keep in mind the long history of this relationship. Although Taiwan now says it wants to be negotiated with like an independent state, one should not lose sight of the fact that up until the 1980’s the regime was committed to retaking the mainland because it considered itself the legitimate government of all of China, including Tibet. Offers from Beijing to assist Taiwan in the recovery from the September 1999 earthquake were rebuffed. Nonetheless, Beijing took the decision to reduce the military portion of the Fiftieth anniversary parade, meant as a warning to Taiwan, because of the quake.

The issue of human rights, dear to the West, has spawned a considerable industry in China. The government and various organizations are in human rights dialogues with groups and countries all over the world, placing their point of view on the table, arguing that human rights have to be seen in the light of levels of development and cultural tradition. The government is suspicious of the agents of western governments who press upon China their policies on Human Rights. Earlier this century, Westerners criticized China for its lack of attention to the rights of the individual over those of the traditional family. Previous Chinese governments were suspicious of this as well.

There is much to learn from others, but no other country replicates the problems, history and conditions of China. We are the losers if we persist in thinking that China is not changing. It is changing, the question is whether or not it will be able to do it at the right pace to avoid internal unrest and meet the needs of the majority of its citizens.

China continues to respect age, but the one child per family policy has produced, in the cities at least, a generation of some potency. It is presentist in outlook and does not feel the revolution in the way that previous generations do. They do not sing “When I grow up I am determined to be a peasant,” as did their parents during the Cultural Revolution. Youth culture is a major challenge for a leadership that is decades its senior. It is a good thing that Jiang Zemin’s grandson is teaching him about the internet!

I asked a young student in a provincial city, if there was resentment of Beijing, particularly since the papers had contained comments about the amount of money being spent there for the Fiftieth anniversary celebrations. “Oh! No!” came the reply. “Beijing is the heart of our country, the symbol of our history.” “Wait until they start collecting income tax,” I said.

Cities like Beijing and Shanghai have surged to the front of modern world cities and are a magnet for youth who currently enjoy freedoms of artistic and personal expression comparable to those enjoyed by the youth in our own society. Shanghai with its opera house and Art Gallery, its glittering skyline, and famous sophistication is where it is at in China. It will soon eclipse Hong Kong as a financial center. Hong Kong remains a free port,
which gives it a major advantage, but Shanghai is striving to retake its former dominant position.

Beijing is a close second to Shanghai in what it has to offer in sophisticated living but Shanghai has the edge. Indeed, the number one and two of Chinese government Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji are both former mayors of Shanghai. Shanghai’s influence is so strong that it is the basis of a joke concerning Li Peng, the former Premier and now head of the National People’s Congress. The story goes that Li Peng returned home one evening from an all day meeting of the inner circle of government. “What was the meeting about?” asked his wife. “I don’t know,” he replied. “They all spoke Shanghainese!”

The countryside, is more problematic. The plan as laid down by Deng, was that certain areas, ie. the coast and the cities would become rich first and bring the others along later. There is still a long way to go. Floods, drought, low farm prices, have made rural conditions difficult. At the same time, farmers have invested in more and more mechanized equipment. Workers are also unhappy as state enterprises are restructured. Some workers maintain that it is corruption at the top, not the inefficiency of the state factories, that is the problem. In the coal industry there are problems, as the government decides to close some mines. In September 1999 it was reported that miners blockaded a railway line for a day, halting traffic. All these things make China seem much like Canada, as long as one remembers to multiply by 40!

I returned to China a year ago and again last month, and I have to say that China at 50 looks pretty good. It is a vibrant exciting place, where the majority of the people are satisfied with the leadership they are receiving. There are twice as many people in China as there were when I first saw it, yet, the levels of prosperity are light years away from 1964. Given that there is a major gap between the rich and poor in the cities and between the cities and the countryside, and between the coastal areas and the far interior, overall material conditions are still much better.

The Government of China continues to tip-toe a path, balancing off liberalization against stability. The example of the Soviet Union and Russia is always before them. The leaders remain conscious of the lessons of Chinese history, when foreign powers took advantage of China’s internal weakness. They know that China is a long way from being a super-power despite the fact that it has been awarded that title by ill-informed foreign observers. There is the continuing problem of seeking accommodation for China’s legitimate global interests, in a world in which the one super-power left, sees China as its future challenger.

These problems, aside, there remains the performance of the daily miracle of feeding, clothing, housing, and transporting one point three billion people with rising expectations. As a foreign observer in 1964, when China’s population was only seven hundred million, I was amazed at the process. Thirty-five years later, when China’s population is more than double, I am in awe.