

Celebrating 70 Years of the New China: A Foreigner's Perspective

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There is a saying very common in China these days: do not forget your original desire, keep the mission firmly in mind.

I begin with this saying since it is part and parcel of the momentous occasion of the 70th anniversary of the founding of the New China. I am currently in China, witnessing firsthand all of the preparations, anticipation, and then the day itself. Indeed, I write this on 1 October, when 70 years ago to this day Mao Zedong stood on the gate that is known as Tiananmen and announced the establishment of the People's Republic of China. Today it was of course Xi Jinping who stood in the same place, acknowledging Mao and the leaders who followed. I watched the whole proceedings live on my computer, quite taken with the celebration of the diversity of China's many nationalities, the recognition of its provinces and autonomous regions, and the emphasis on young people who hold China's future in their hands. Of course, I was impressed by the relatively brief military part of the parade, for a socialist country has to be able to protect itself from those who would seek to undermine it. Representatives from many countries were there, especially from developing countries like China. They are increasingly taken with the 'China paradigm' as a model for a way forward, and so turning their backs on the shattered neo-liberal project known as the 'Washington Consensus'.

But let us step back for a moment and ask what does a foreigner who is somewhat familiar with China notice. What do everyday people say about the celebration of the 70th anniversary? I have had a month or so to talk with people to find out what they feel and think.

The most common observation is that today is a recognition of all the hard work that has gone into the last 70 years. Again and again, people say: 'We have worked so hard; now we can celebrate and enjoy our achievements for a little'. The achievements are clear: realising the basic human right of socio-economic wellbeing for all people; lifting more than 800 million people out of poverty; building a prosperous and increasingly strong China, so that the people I know have a greater cultural confidence in speaking about and

explaining what makes China tick; the reality that Marxism is even more now at the core of all China does. Indeed, the CPC and its history was a major feature of the parade in Beijing that I watched today.

But work? My sense at times is that people here work too hard. By contrast, they often say that they do not work hard enough. Alongside work there is struggle: the past 70 years have had a large dose of international opposition and the Chinese have struggled against the odds. They know full well that what has been achieved today is as much struggle as it is work. Perhaps I should rephrase that: from their experience, they know that work is struggle. And they are not afraid of struggle.

After all, they are very aware that much remains to be done. Tackling environmental problems has already made great headway, but they know that much more needs to be done. There are still a few million people living in poverty and this is unacceptable for any notion of a moderately prosperous and well-off society (*xiaokang shehui*). They are tackling the desperate efforts of a fractured 'West' (a handful of former colonisers) to contain China and tell it what to do. But they will not deviate from their own path and will certainly not let others dictate the terms.

But isn't this all just a version of nationalism, a Chinese version of 'America first' and screw the rest? Not at all. In the past, I have sought to understand a positive sense of nationalism in terms of how it was thoroughly reinterpreted, first in the Soviet Union and then later in many colonised countries that sought national liberation. In this light, nationalism became an anti-colonial desire, with a strong focus on sovereignty. This also entailed a respect for the sovereignty of others: in the same way that you do not want your own country to be dominated by another, you also do not want to do the same thing to others. Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong's 'Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence' express this position most clearly.

As I have talked with people, another sense has begun to emerge. To begin with 'nationalism' is a bad translation of the Chinese term '*ai guo*'. Literally, it means 'love of country', with nothing of the 'nation-state' or '-ism' about it. 'Love of country' is an inescapable identity, for all Chinese people anywhere in the world. It embodies 5,000 years of culture, history, tradition, philosophy and political forms. The most important point for

me is that 'love of country' is not predicated on an 'I win, you lose' mentality, or 'zero-sum' as it is sometimes called (witness 'America first'). Instead, it means that 'love' of my own country, my own cultural identity, is the basis for respecting, engaging with and promoting the identity of others. Thus, Chinese people see 'love of country' as a benefit to the globe, for as others also 'love' their country they have common project.

Still, a few may still feel that all the flag waving is an effort to find a replacement for Marxism in China. Not only does this assumption reflect a good deal of ignorance concerning Xi Jinping's resolute focus on Marxism as the core and guiding principle of China's path, let alone the 90 million strong CPC as a *communist* party clear in its mission, this suspicion also ignores the reality of the flag itself. In China, it is called the 'five star red banner [*wuxinghongqi*]'. The red banner is of course a key communist symbol, as is the star. So every time someone waves a five star red banner, they are waving a communist flag.

And this brings me back to the saying with which I began: do not forget your original desire, keep the mission firmly in mind (*bu wang chuxin, laoji shiming*). Everywhere in China you find this saying, but it is one that immediately resonates with people. What is the original desire? Marxism. What is the mission? communism. And what does communism need for its realisation? More work and struggle.