JOINING THE MODERN WORLD

Inside and Outside China

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Preface

In recent years, I have been impressed by the fresh efforts of Chinese people everywhere to try to be as modern as possible. At the same time, I am struck by the way the criteria of what is modern has been changing during the past century. The standards of modernity, often proclaimed as self-evidently universal, have been set by the successful countries and these standards have been rising as those countries grow richer and more powerful. Two consequences follow from this trend. The first is positive. The higher demands make the Chinese work harder to strive for that elusive modernity. Never having been afraid of hard work, most young Chinese are ready to meet that challenge. The other is negative. The Chinese people are beginning to feel a deep contradiction in this setting of standards. When China and other similarly poor countries were down, the standards were low or lowered and little was expected of their leaders and the people. But when there has been marked progress, as has happened in China during the past two decades, standards were lifted incrementally so that China seems always to be behind, with little chance of ever reaching the moving standards expected of it. Indeed, standards seemed invariably higher for the Chinese as if the successful states sought

to hold a moral sword above Chinese heads indefinitely. In addition, what sounds like a school principal's tone at seeing a poor report card at the end of each year is deeply offensive.

The ongoing drama of Chinese people trying to be modern has also been enacted in different parts of the world. There are interesting differences among these Chinese depending on where they have been living. The general trend, however, is unmistakable. A great striving for betterment is supported by a strong capacity to adapt and change, and this is reflected in the way Chinese seize new opportunities when they occur. The essays collected in this volume try to capture these efforts both inside and outside China. Seven of them were first presented as occasional lectures, each covering changes during the past century and a half. The sixth, "Transforming the Trading Chinese", was written to describe a longer term development that is transforming Asia generally, but China most remarkably. Together, they offer small pieces of the mosaic that seeks to portray some aspects of the Chinese practising the art of *modernising*.

The question remains, will the people in China go on accepting their fate as that of Sisyphus, condemned to push that huge modern boulder up a hill that seems to get steeper whenever they get near the top? Or, will they conclude one day that the mythical hill was placed there to keep them inferior and thus stop worrying about it? The evidence is that, when standards of progress take a people's history and cultural values into account, they are better understood and more readily sought after by these people and, therefore, more likely to be achievable. When they do not and, instead, are relative to the specific kinds of progress achieved by a few countries through accumulated wealth and power, such applications of standards undermine the will to keep trying. I do not believe the Chinese people are easily discouraged. We simply have to look at their history over the past 140 years or so to see

how resilient and hopeful they have been. But it is important that these efforts get the recognition they deserve, not as proof that universal criteria have been validated but as achievements of people who have fought adversity with determination against all odds.

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I have been asked to consider where China stands today in her long transition to modern political and economic structures. The central theme here is that China has been trying to join the modern world for about 140 years. I ask the following questions. How far has it succeeded? Hasn't it arrived at that goal not just once but many times? What does success mean if that modern world has not been a single set of norms but a number of shifting norms?

The first step was taken in 1861 when the Qing court established the "office for the general management of affairs and trade with every country", better known in short as the *Zongli yamen*. This was equivalent to a ministry of foreign affairs, and represented the first time that the Chinese empire formally acknowledged all foreign countries as equals. You will note that this first step was taken on the eve of the inauguration of President Abraham Lincoln. At that time, China was already engrossed in

*This lecture was the opening lecture at a symposium entitled "Coping with China". It was organised by the Ethics and Public Policy Center and the Ronald Reagan Foundation in Washington, D.C. on 9 May 2000.

a sort of civil war — the Taiping rebellion — and was soon to face other rebellions, for example, the Nian and the White Lotus in North China. And, by the time President Lincoln declared all slaves to be free in late 1862, two major Muslim rebellions in both China's north-west and south-west border provinces were threatening the dynasty. Also, it was not until eight years after the Confederate Army of General Robert E. Lee surrendered and the Union was saved, that the Qing armies finally, in 1873, suppressed all the major rebellions that had been plaguing the empire.

Compared with the four years of the American Civil War, the Chinese fought their own internal wars for at least 25 years. Another major difference was that China's was not a citizens' war pitting 21 million people in the north against 9 million in the south, but a series of wars by ruling elites to hold down a population of 400 million. However, there were features that were more comparable. For example, the unity of the polity was preserved and law and order reestablished. The numbers of casualties for both countries were excessive, and, taken in proportion, the ferocity and destruction were equally horrendous.

I use this comparison to illustrate several points. Both countries were taught bitter lessons from their respective wars. While they treated these internal conflicts as dire warnings against division, there were great differences in what they learnt from these events. To the United States, the Civil War was the source of honour and achievement to the country's leaders, part of a continuing education in nation-building. To the Chinese, their series of wars aroused much more ambivalent feelings among the ruling classes. They led to relief that the Confucian state survived, but they also confirmed that deep social and political cleavages existed within the population. The cleavages not only ensured that foreign pressures could prevail and the imperial Confucian state would

soon perish, but they also bedevilled successive regimes of China for the next century.

For example, the Taiping rebels left a bloody experience of emotional populism to be taken up by nationalist and communist revolutionaries alike during the 20th century. This populism was rooted in a tradition of peasant rebellion, but it was also externally inspired and that provided a lesson in modern people power that would not only challenge future leaders of China but also frighten the later elites of every political persuasion. As for the fierce suppression of the Muslims in Xinjiang, that had become more than the normal task of defending China's northern and western borders. The intervention of Anglo-Indian and Russian forces was part of the modern world that was confronting China. The actions of the Great Powers in Central Asia, threatening to repeat what they had done on the China coast, made the Chinese leaders understand even better that the concept of sovereignty as the basis of modern nationhood applied no less to its precarious overland borders.

At the same time, economic penetration by foreign powers of China's markets had begun through the treaty ports, notably Shanghai, Guangzhou and Tianjin. New generations of entrepreneurs, industrialists and financiers emerged from these points of penetration as well as students of science, law and management. A deeper modernisation of new elites had begun. This process was accompanied by large-scale migration of Chinese workers and traders, who left the China coast to join those sojourners who were already in Southeast Asia and to lead the exodus to the gold fields of north America and Australasia. Most of the people who went abroad were those who had long resented the Manchu-based regime in Beijing. The opening to the outside world gave them a chance to experience new ideas of modernity. They were deeply impressed by what they saw outside — industrial

growth, naval power, banking and finance and the laws which were the foundations of western society. They also found that their great civilisation was no longer admired by Westerners, who felt racially and culturally superior to the Chinese. Their response to such stimuli was to develop a sense of Chineseness which they had not been conscious of before. This took shape at the end of the century, in most part ambiguous and inchoate, but nevertheless gathering strong emotions akin to modern national pride. It gathered force as the next generation fought to free themselves from both Manchu rule, now described as alien, and from an archaic Confucian state.

New identities as modern Chinese were thus shaped, accompanied by great expectations. The world outside taught them that such political consciousness would be followed by the creation of a united sovereign Chinese nation, one that would be able to take advantage of all the technologies and institutions that were being introduced. New attitudes towards radical change were needed, and those who had benefited from commercial intercourse with the more advanced capitalist world and from formal study abroad were keen for the country to adjust to such changes. For most of the 20th century, there was virtually no resistance to the idea that China had to modernise. Calls for modern schools and colleges, all using textbooks modelled on Europe, the US and Japan, were heard all over the country. If anything, young people vied to be the most progressive because that was the most patriotic thing to do. In the shadow of the Social Darwinist ideas prevalent among them, modernisation was the only way to save the country from being declared unfit to survive.

The first years of the new Chinese Republic coincided with another war, the Great War of 1914–1918. The global impact of that war took many forms. The carnage arising from fierce national rivalries among the European powers was eye-opening and turned

many Chinese thinkers away from Western Europe as models of development, including that of liberal and democratic capitalism. These Chinese were not in doubt that China had joined the modern world. But they saw that they had to make choices as to which bits of that world they should learn most from. By calling their country a republic in 1911, they believed they were embarked on the road to transformation. Indeed, expectations were so high that many were impatient to get away from their own past, from anything that seemed to stand in the way of the thorough modernisation their country needed. Since the 1890s, many elite groups had debated the virtues of several models from the West and from Japan. We now know that no ideology seemed to have been too new and untried to be debated. But the First World War and its aftermath did give them pause and led ultimately to a narrowing of practical models for China to choose from.

Judgments about being modern were made largely on two grounds: that which provided the surest way to wealth and power, and that which most quickly and directly served the needs of "the people", a new liberating ideal about helping the downtrodden majority which, while initially a slogan taken from the West, found deep roots in parts of Chinese tradition. Both these grounds led the Chinese away from the incremental reforms needed to modernise commerce and industry and consolidate economic development in stages. Instead, they turned to two rival ideologies, both from the West, that promised swift results: the first being the nationalist models of Germany, Italy and Japan, and the other, the Russian revolution that gave life to international communism. I shall not dwell here on the well-told story of what led to the defensive war against Japan and the victory of the Chinese Communist Party. The eventful years from 1937 to 1949 have been written about by many historians and political analysts and the consequences are now obvious to all.

I have offered this background to the present position of China in order to underline two points. First, that the Chinese have tried to be modern, not too reluctantly but too often. They always tried too hard and too impatiently to find short cuts to restore China to the self-respect and dignity they believed only modernity could bring. Second, that they have learnt how dynamic the concept of modernity is and have now come to terms with the way the markers that define modernity are moved every now and then. When the norms are changed, usually because of the influence of the richest and strongest power or group of powers, China's large and cumbersome structures have found it difficult to adapt and cope with each major shift.

The efforts by China's elites to modernise quickly have brought them much pain and distress as the people struggled with supposedly universal ideals which were not fulfilled, and with imported institutions which often did not work. It cannot be denied that the highest ideals that led China to several revolutions have come from the modern West. Whether it was nationalism, socialism, capitalism, liberalism or communism, the idea of responsible elites saving or serving, enriching or empowering, the people had always sounded beautiful. There was probably little wrong with the abstract goals these Chinese aspired to. The means to achieve their objectives, however, proved to be far more difficult to agree on. Again and again, they failed to find the way to realise their aims. The institutions were often dysfunctional, many of the leaders were corrupt and, repeatedly, the country was too weak or disunited to deal with the external interventions or threats it had to face. One could provide a long list of reasons for failure over the past 140 years. Among those that stand out were the disjunction between ruling class aspirations and grassroots reality, the tendency for the Chinese elites to crave decisive success while standing on shifting sands.

Although the urge to be modern has been strong among generations of the educated classes of China, they have not succeeded in building the modernisation they wanted on the foundations of their ancient civilisation. Since the late 1970s, there has been a retreat from revolutionary modernism towards an untried transition from a planned economy. This phase of nation-building seeks to reconcile new economic and social experimentations with an historic pride in a Chinese identity. Some parts of the reforms have been spectacularly successful. Others have led to the rise of new elite groups, each with unprecedented interests to protect. These new groups in leadership positions have little of the old over-arching ideals to fight for. The authority of the ruling Communist Party has been eroded by a number of self-destructive internal conflicts and also by the systemic weaknesses of Stalinist-Maoist economics. Their position today can only be defended by their success in meeting the expectations of an increasingly literate and pluralist society.

The current ruling groups are still being formed on the basis of older elites coopting those who have responded successfully to the new opportunities brought about by the recent reforms. As they gain in confidence, they have devised ways to consolidate their power. These include learning from experiences elsewhere as well in history. For example, elites can be overthrown by their own people when they consistently fail to deliver on their promises. They can be removed by rebellions or revolutions, or through various kinds of democratic elections. By choosing the path of reform, the new leaders are trying to ensure that future developments will not encourage people to resort to violence again. They are fearful of losing what has been gained during the past 20 years and understandably wary about people power. Such power was harnessed by Mao Zedong, as well as by those who resisted him, to support the cause of fratricidal political struggles from the

Hundred Flowers campaigns through the Great Leap Forward to the Cultural Revolution. The destructive forces which those struggles unleashed have taught all Chinese to be shy of mass movements of any form.

The options open now include learning from recent Chinese history. China has always had powerful elites, and hard lessons have been learnt from earlier activist generations. For example, aristocrats and mandarins like Li Hongzhang and Zhang Zhidong, followed by militarists and warlords like Yuan Shikai and his officer class, who were then replaced by conservative nationalists of the Guomindang under Chiang Kai-shek and these in turn by the patriotic revolutionaries of Mao Zedong's Communist Party.

So what is different for the new leading groups today? As with similar groups in the past, their worlds have been challenged to change and prepare for more change. There was never a period that was stable for long. They had first believed that China's failures were largely due to not having enough moral and upright leaders and, therefore, a critical return to tradition was needed. Today, there are still echoes of that view, except that what is now regarded as their heritage includes, not only the surviving bits of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and recently imported Christianity, but also what Mao Zedong and his disciples saw as progressive in secular Western history. With such an unintegrated mixture as a possible heritage, the Chinese people have little to feel certain about. The idea of simply training better leaders to master the Chinese heritage seems totally inadequate for what China needs to do. It cannot make up for institutions that have been shown to be no longer functional.

What about those who sought other models to help reinterpret the Confucian state? The hope that ideas from the world outside would strengthen core Chinese values with modern machines, technologies and methods, and that the rejuvenated elites arising

from that transformation would dedicate themselves to radical reforms, still has appeal. Many questions, however, remain: why did their predecessors who embraced such a course fail? Why did the earlier reforms not prevent revolution and the overthrow of the old ruling classes? Those who had created the republic in 1911 seemed merely to have replaced one lot of rulers with another. They had not been equipped to deal with modernity, but were so divided from the start that anarchy seemed to have been unavoidable. What is to be learnt from that experience today?

The failures had led to a more pluralistic generation, most of whom were the products of progressive modern schools. They were exposed early to scientific and business skills and wanted the country to be fully sovereign and independent. Unfortunately, they were no less divided. Today, even more pluralistic educated groups may be found. There are larger numbers of them and they are better-prepared to explore new ideas and challenge the new orthodoxy than any previous generation. They are also no less determined to protect their country's interests. The question is, how are they to overcome the extensive corruption and the lack of a binding ideal that together threaten their unity?

Following the bold turnaround by Deng Xiaoping, this generation is disillusioned with Maoist shibboleths and have taken to wide-ranging economic reforms with determination. The conversion of these groups to a new faith in incremental development, something their predecessors had rejected, provides hope for future stability. They have accepted the ambiguities of a socialism adapting to the demands of a market economy. They are learning the values of new professional classes, and are increasingly aware of the need for new laws and institutions for a civic society. But they still have such a big country to modernise and it is clear from past experience that models good for others may not work for China. They are convinced now, as Deng