



30 Reflections of China's 30 Years of Reform

1978—2008



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**This Book Is a Tribute
to China's 30 Years of Reform
1978—2008**

Preface

Time really does fly — 30 years have whizzed by since 1978. The few big events which occurred that long ago, namely the matriculation of the first group of university students after the restoration of the national college entrance examination, the great discussion on practice as the sole criterion for testing truth, the reversal of the verdict on the 1976 Tian'anmen Incident, the fixing of farm output quotas for each household at Xiaogang Village of Fengyang County, Anhui Province, and especially the convening of the Third Plenary Session of the CPC's Eleventh Central Committee, all remain as fresh in my mind as if they had occurred only yesterday.

This has been the most vibrant period of Chinese history, during which the Chinese people have gradually expanded their living space, development opportunities and all kinds of rights and benefits. Thanks to the country's opening and reform policies, we have eliminated poverty, begun living a relatively comfortable life and, after decades or even centuries of self-isolation, China has gradually re-merged into the world community.

On the historical stage during that time, dramatic scenes have been acted out one after another which, resounding with pithy maxims and wise apothegms that would enlighten the benighted, have revealed so

many people's prowess and sorrows, glories and dreams. Under the overall impact of reform, they have left their indelible marks on history.

History is made by people. The greatest change born of the opening and reform measures is a new system to help people realize their potential and fulfill their ambitions. In practice, everybody makes history and each human life reflects certain fragments of history. With this in mind, the Foreign Languages Press salutes the thirtieth anniversary of opening up and initial reform, along with the sacred Olympic Flame which is now illuminating the Chinese land, with *30 Reflections of China's 30 Years of Reform* in both the English and Chinese versions. This collection of articles unfolds the thirty years of history through the recounting of people's life experiences. I favor this type of narration because it shows our history more vividly and realistically.

After reading the first draft of this book, I have the following few thoughts:

First of all, the book upholds an extraordinary theme. During these past 30 years, China has undergone profound changes in all its areas of endeavor. This book is intended to trace the lives of ordinary Chinese people against the backdrop of the political as well as economic reforms and the sweeping changes in the social and economic fields in Chinese society. All the transformations are observed from the detailed aspects of personal lives, enabling readers to better understand the achievements and benefits of the reforms. Besides, such details will give them a deeper insight into the considerations that were the foundation for the reform initiatives.

Secondly, the book provides a broad vision. The 30 individuals selected for it include Yuan Geng, one of the earliest contributors to the country's measures of opening and reform; Professor Jiang Ping, who took pains to develop reform theories in cooperation with me; and private entrepreneurs who distinguished themselves in the transformative

process and even today remain supportive towards the sound and rapid development of the national economy. Besides, most of the stories are about ordinary people from all walks of life and who live under vastly different circumstances. Readers with firsthand experience of this segment of Chinese history will almost certainly find their own more ambitious, soulful selves in those people.

Thirdly, the book is substantiated by a variety of angles. Whereas the story of one person alone can hardly cover all the social changes brought about during the past 30 years, the life stories of 30 people can reflect far more aspects of social-economic life in China. From the restoration of the national college entrance examination system, the return of educated youths from the countryside and the redressing of mishandled cases, through the implementation of the household contractual responsibility system in rural areas and the reform of the enterprise shareholding system, to the recent medical reform in rural areas, democratic management at the grassroots level, efforts to balance urban and rural development and to build the new socialist countryside, etc., the book tries to answer questions as to the impact of these strategic decisions and measures on ordinary people, not in the form of self-authoritative comments but with concrete, faithful records.

Fourthly, the book touches on a number of sensitive issues. It does not blindly sing the praises of past achievements, or turn away from social problems in the course of telling the grief, sorrow and pain of 30 individuals, including factory layoffs, the Three Gorges migrants, conflicts among different social groups, and the straitened conditions of peasant-turned industrial workers. The book is not for theoretical guidance, so there is no need to track down the causes of these problems or to actually find solutions. That leaves much leeway for further discussion or research.

Some foreign friends often ask me, “What, after all, has opening and reform brought to the Chinese people?” This book, I believe, will help to

address those doubts to some extent.

Over recent years, the debate over whether to continue the reforms or not has surfaced from time to time. Some people think that, after thirty years, there is no reason to go much farther, and that any overhaul will mean the bankruptcy of some former policies. However, many who work in the fields of theoretical research, including myself, firmly maintain that the reforms have been very successful on the whole — the changes in the lives of the 30 individuals in the book have already proven this. Nevertheless, no policy can solve every problem in a single step. Take the main feature of the market economy, the enterprise shareholding system, for example. We used to argue a lot about whether to start that reform but found it somewhat premature to bring the system in line with established international practices, so we chose the “double-track operation system,” whereby the incremental assets of state-owned enterprises would go public while their principal assets would remain temporarily out of circulation. Later, as the conditions matured and the disadvantages of the “double-track operation system” became all too apparent, we introduced a second shareholding reform to turn the “double tracks” into a “single track.” This is what economists call “the split share structure reform.”

It is said that the profound changes to Chinese society resulting from China’s economic development during the past 30 years have exceeded those throughout the previous several thousand years. This remark is very interesting. Maybe it is improper to oversimplify the differences between periods of history, but the experiences acquired and accomplishments made in our successful transformation from the socialist planned economic system to the market economic system are evidently unparalleled. In fact, it is a pioneering undertaking in history. So long as we continue to be blessed with a broad vision, an open mindset and the entrepreneurial spirit of the past 30 years, China will amaze the world by creating even more miracles during the next 30 years. Despite uncertainties ahead, we will

remain true to our beliefs.

Being part of all that has happened over all these years, I have hardly stopped recollecting, witnessing and pondering. There is, indeed, a reservoir of memorable, soul-stirring tales to share. Although I may not agree with all the authors of this assortment of articles, they arouse a genuine feeling of “returning” to life itself with all its details and “commonplace” occurrences. However, this sort of returning does not make us any less happy or proud to be living in such a great era. I believe that readers will feel the same — you will admit that the book is more than worth reading although you may not agree with some statements and perspectives in it.

Li Yining

July 18th, 2008

Guanghua School of Management, Peking University



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At the Starting Point of the Reform

Yuan Geng

1978: Acting Director of the Foreign Affairs Bureau in the Ministry of Communications (now Ministry of Transport), managing vice-chairman of the China Merchants' Steam Navigation Company.

2008: Retired



“After the Spring Festival, your mother will go with me to Hong Kong to work. Take care of yourselves while we are absent, and be diligent in your studies and work,” declared Yuan Geng at the reunion party on 1979’s New Year’s Eve. “For this good news, cheers!” That year Yuan Geng turned 62. In 1978, as the Acting Director of the Foreign Affairs Bureau in the Ministry of Communications (now Ministry of Transport), he had entertained the idea of retiring. However, just at that time, he received an order from the ministry to go to Hong Kong and take charge of the day-to-day work of the China Merchants’ Steam Navigation Company.

CM (China Merchants) was at that time a subsidiary of the Ministry of Communications. Yuan Geng, who had for years been engaged in foreign affairs work, knew well the vicissitudes of CM during the last century: on December 23, 1872, Li Hongzhang (an important official in the late-Qing dynasty and a pioneer of the Westernization Movement) presented a memorial to the throne on starting the China Merchants’ Steam Navigation Company, which later built up a group of modern industrial, transportation and financial corporations. In 1950, the staff of the Hong Kong CM, with 13 ships, staged an uprising against the Kuomintang by declaring allegiance to New China. When Yuan began to work in his position, however, its total capital was only 130 million yuan. He realized that the CM wouldn’t survive without reforms. He hoped the central authorities would permit the CM to take full advantage of the favorable conditions in both Hong

Kong and the mainland, such as the capital and techniques of the former and lands and labor force of the latter. He expected the authorities to assign Shekou, part of Bao'an County in Guangdong Province that lies adjacent to the northwestern corner of Hong Kong, to the CM as the industrial area.

Yuan Geng's plan was sanctioned by the central authorities soon after the Spring Festival. But since there were so many things in China at that time waiting to be done and requiring money, the government couldn't provide much money for CM's reform and development. A leader said to Yuan Geng, "The Ministry of Communications can earn foreign currencies through synergies with Hong Kong. I hope you can buy ships and build ports on your own; the State won't give you any money. You must strive to survive and to develop. You are to earn foreign currencies and pay taxes, you need to discuss with the Customs, the Ministry of Finance and the banks; otherwise they will interfere if you are to follow different practices there."

Yuan and his wife left Beijing on the day that Deng Xiaoping returned from his visit to the United States. (Deng was the first Chinese leader to have visited the United States since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949.—*tr.*) Twenty minutes after Deng's special plane landed, they took off to Hong Kong via Guangzhou. The weather in south China was turning warm in early February. In the airport, Yuan took off his black worsted coat and handed it to his son, wishing to get down to work with a light pack, both literally and figuratively. He was the 29th leader of the CM, as well as the first managing director, chairman and Party Committee's secretary of the Shekou Industrial Zone in Shenzhen. Yuan was the one to fire the first cannon of reform in south China.

The first lesson Yuan Geng learned from capitalists was to make good use of money. The CM bought an office building, and the ven-

dor required immediate payment. When Yuan wrote him a cheque for 20 million dollars, the vendor promptly drove to the bank to deposit it. The day was a Friday. The bank would be closed over the next two days. If he had failed to deposit this sum of money to the bank before 15:00 that day, he would have lost three days' interest. Yuan thought: people on the mainland wouldn't handle money that way. Later this lesson led to the famous motto: "Time is money," which echoed in the hearts of everyone involved in China's reforms.

A different event produced yet another famous motto: "Efficiency is life." The 600-meter-long Shun'an Dock project was the main one among the infrastructure projects managed by Yuan Geng. In 1979, at the beginning, the project followed the conventional equalitarian pay system, and the workers lacked enthusiasm. A worker only moved 20-30 trucks of earth in one day. The project progressed slowly. Yuan introduced incentives: the daily work quota for every worker was set at 55 truckloads of earth and whoever met the quota would receive a bonus of 0.02 yuan per truckload, and an excess bonus of 0.04 yuan for every truckload exceeding the quota.

These two occurrences inspired Yuan Geng, resulting in the slogan "Time is money; efficiency is life," which drew a strong response from the people. It was really courageous and insightful to put forward this type of slogan at that time when money was a taboo. The totally different concept of efficiency and values fitted in better with the rules of the market. Some scholars described the slogan as "a spring thunder that broke down barriers in people's minds." A foreign merchant investing in Shekou said that the value of this slogan was that it had a tremendous impact on the thinking of the Chinese people so that starting with Shekou, China was gradually transformed into a market-oriented country.

Yuan Geng also led the country in reforming the personnel

system. He abolished the system of life tenure, and publically invited applications for leading posts. The members of the board of directors were elected by the staff. Anyone who was supported by fewer than half of the staff members in the annual vote of confidence would be automatically dismissed. He also introduced into China the practice of public bidding for construction projects. All these methods, like an enlightenment campaign, caused profound changes in the outlook of the Chinese people .

The Shekou Industrial Zone was the test-tube baby of China's reforms. Large numbers of like-minded people gathered in Shekou, creating numerous miracles. Its efficiency was praised as the "Shenzhen speed." In just five years, the zone changed from an exit for people to flee to Hong Kong, to a place that attracted competent individuals and capital back. Seventy-four foreign-funded enterprises and joint ventures were established, among them 51 had gone into operation, with 14 already reporting profits. The average wage had become greater than that in Macao.

Deng Xiaoping, the chief architect of China's reform, came to Shekou for an inspection on the morning of January 26, 1984. Seeing the dock construction progress in Shekou, he was very happy and said, "You have built a dock, that is good! The system is fine." "The system is fine" were the first words of praise uttered by Deng during his inspection tour to Shekou and Shenzhen. As Deng was interested in this topic, Yuan gave him more details about Shekou, including facts about the economic system, organization, personnel system, wage system and housing supply reform. Finally, he said: "We don't know if we have been successful or have failed in these adventures that we have braved." Deng nodded and gave an affirmative reply.

Deng Xiaoping's approval of Shekou's motto "Time is money,