



AT LARGE

## Authoritarianism the Chinese Way

By Doug Bandow on 12.18.09 @ 6:08AM

Repeat after me: the People's Republic of China is an authoritarian country. Political leaders are not elected. Human rights activists go to jail. Religious persecution is real.

China is not free.

Yet to visit the PRC is to visit a nation that feels free. It's remarkably easy to get a visa. The consular office in Washington, D.C. is always crowded; pay an extra \$30 and get same-day service. It's a lot harder for Chinese to get a visa from the U.S. government.

Blacklisting presumably occurs, but most vetting must be perfunctory. Given the time difference, the Washington consulate is handing out visas while the Beijing Foreign Ministry is sleeping. The PRC appears to have decided to err on the side of collecting U.S. dollars.

Beijing's spacious new airport has no forbidding security presence. Exiting health check, immigration, and customs is no more onerous than returning home to the U.S.

Most Chinese and foreigners saunter through the green "nothing to declare" customs channel. No one appears to be checked for anything. I could have carried in political or religious literature without incident. (Heck, some people might view the copies of two of my foreign policy books which I brought on my most recent trip as subversive.)

Presumably some people are discovered smuggling, but this isn't North Korea, where my luggage was carefully searched and I was questioned for bringing in a few copies of a benign volume on the two Koreas. The Beijing regime apparently has decided that it is worth accepting the risk of

minor subversion in order to encourage large-scale business and tourist travel.

Once through you can fly anywhere in China. Temporary restrictions are imposed in crises, as during unrest in Tibet. But most of the country is open: the domestic terminal is full of Western passengers with no one in authority paying the slightest attention.

I went to Shenyang, a large city in China's northeast, for an academic conference. The process was the same when I visited other cities as part of official delegations and to play tourist. Show up at the airport and you're on your way. No security forces demanding your papers or restricting your movements. No need to get permission or sign in.

The economy is remarkably free and, in larger urban areas, developed. Western franchises (think KFC and McDonald's) sit on the major thoroughfares. Luxury brands, such as Prada, populate fashionable shopping districts. Big name hotels look and feel like big name hotels everywhere.

Perhaps the most important test: supermarkets are full of stuff. The campus store at the college where I was staying had diet Coke and diet Pepsi -- my traditional test for any economy -- as well as a wide range of chocolate bars. (Little else is necessary for the good life!) Plus most other food items you might want. Even rural China has choices only dreamed of a few years ago. This is no longer an impoverished regimented society in which everything is limited.

Western influences are hard to miss. In Shenyang I went to dinner with the other conferees at a traditional Chinese restaurant where all the waiters and waitresses were wearing Santa caps and (secular) Christmas decorations covered the walls. It could have been any of dozens of U.S. establishments.

The streets have the feel of freedom. Busy people going about their affairs without much worry of government interference -- personally and commercially, anyway. Everyone seems to own a cell phone. People have gone from bicycles to automobiles. It is a population that isn't easily monitored or controlled.

The government reportedly continues to strengthen the Great Firewall of China. Restrictions on Chinese websites undoubtedly are the broadest, and were impossible for me to assess. But I found few problems getting on English-language sites, other than all of my attempts to reach Google landing me on the German language version. Still, I was able to use the Google-inspired AOL search engine, which was no different in practice.

Western news sources from the *Washington Times* to the *New York Times* came up. So did blogs, unlike at times in the past. Even *The American Spectator* online was available! I've had far more trouble online on previous visits, when several political sites and blogs were blocked.

Discussions at academic forums appear to be relatively free, even though the official media might not cover such topics. Without incident I noted in my paper the problems of inadequate legal and political development as well as corruption in dealing with American investment. One Chinese participant discussed the rise of civil society in the democratization of South Korea, which after decades of authoritarian rule has evolved into a vibrant democracy -- obviously not what the Beijing leadership wants to encourage among its people. At previous forums participants talked about encouraging the rule of law. People may self-censor, but do not appear to fear that every word is being monitored and passed along to political or security officials.

Conversation at dinner was about normal life: academic pursuits, family matters, business opportunities, personal foibles. Politics no longer consumes Chinese society. The university Communist Party secretary appeared at the conference opening ceremony, but party imagery is largely absent from both the campus and the city. There are no disquisitions about revolution, no suggestions that the PRC and America represent antagonistic systems.

All of this obviously is to the good.

OF COURSE, NOTHING DIMINISHES the magnitude and brutality of present political restrictions, manifested in many different ways. Or suggests that democracy is certain or soon to bloom. But China also is not totalitarian Communist, at least in the sense that we once understood totalitarian Communist to be. Rather, the so-called "People's Republic of China" is complex and ever evolving. What the PRC will look like in one or two decades is hard to predict.

Perhaps the Communist Party will be able to maintain political control. Perhaps the country will evolve into some sort of authoritarian nationalistic system. In either case China is likely to be an important economic and political rival of America. But then, even a democratic China is unlikely to accept perpetual U.S. domination.

The Chinese I have met are patriots acutely aware of China's history and its recent humiliations. They strongly desire to acquire a good education and learn English for themselves and their nation.

They want to both cooperate and compete with America. The Chinese people recognize that their country remains relatively poor and faces substantial economic and social challenges. The financial crisis and quick Chinese recovery have increased Chinese confidence, but no one calls the U.S. a paper tiger. They see greatness ahead for their nation. But that doesn't mean they expect conflict with the U.S.

Others may think differently, of course. There is an ideological left in China, which opposes much of China's market shift. Suspicion of America is particularly strong in the military. It is difficult to predict Beijing's future geopolitical ambitions. The perception that Washington is trying to contain the PRC could spark antagonism. Much could go wrong with the China-U.S. relationship.

We need to work to make sure it doesn't.

Four decades ago the PRC was convulsed by the Cultural Revolution -- a bloody, xenophobic intra-party power struggle. The U.S. and China had recently fought in Korea and had no diplomatic relations. China was poor, totalitarian, and aggressively subversive, and involved in an ongoing military confrontation with U.S.-supported Taiwan. Few Americans visited the PRC and even fewer Chinese visited America. Conflict was easily imaginable.

Today the relationship continues to grow more interdependent, relaxed, and familiar at both the personal and national levels. After four visits Shenyang feels, if not exactly like home, then homey. I recognize the airport, hotels, restaurants, university, conference center, and especially people.

The American and Chinese peoples are buying more things from each other and seeing more of

each other. The old days of easily demonizing each other are over. Both nations have much at stake in a prosperous and peaceful order. Though political differences there will be many, there is no obvious reason the present superpower and emerging superpower cannot get along peacefully in coming years. But they need to work to make that so.

The U.S. will be the most influential nation for years, even decades, to come. It is, however, going to have to share the world stage with a steadily more influential and assertive PRC. China is nowhere close to pushing America aside -- China's limitations and America's strengths both are too great. Indeed, it is possible that the PRC will crash and burn before attaining international superstardom.

But some day, whether it comes in two, three, or four decades, the two countries are likely to meet as global equals. That will force the U.S. to operate very differently, especially in Asia. It behooves Washington to prepare for what is coming, and to begin thinking about how it should respond to that day.

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