China after 30 years

By Steve McCoy-Thompson © 2011

I recently returned to China for the first time in almost thirty years. To say the country has changed during that period would be a huge understatement. I first travelled to China in 1982, as part of a seven-month university abroad program, when the country had just opened its doors after decades of isolation from most of the western world. Accordingly, it was a dynamic, exciting place to be – full of anticipation and anxiety about the future – as it is now. To lay the snapshot impressions of China 1982 against those of 2011 is to capture the magnitude of this change and to get some idea of where the country may be heading. The following sections highlight those areas where that change was most noticeable, at least to me: in transportation, in the cities, and in the people themselves.

Transportation

In 1982, travel was exciting and harrowing. Steam engine trains were the most common means of travel and getting a seat was a true adventure. After purchasing a ticket, which sometimes included bargaining the price, you had to push, shove and race along the platform to find a seat. Families would typically send an older son ahead to find a spot and then pass luggage and children through a side car window to secure a space. Once inside, we had to sidestep huge sacks of rice and live chickens in order to carve a place on a packed wooden bench. And the commodes were, well, to be avoided.
But we loved it. The people were incredibly nice and many literally insisted on giving their spot to a foreigner. Overnight travel was the best, crammed in six-person stalls with three bare platforms to a wall. We would talk till midnight until lights out, when the blaring noise of Beijing Opera was mercifully shut down. The speakers would shout again at dawn, however, and we were greeted by the ubiquitous tea trolley ladies who filled our cups (if we had one) with scalding tea or a scoop of rice (often with rocks). When we finally arrived, it was always with a mixture of relief and sadness.

Now, travel is much less an imposition. I glide in a high speed electric train from Guangzhou to Hong Kong and fly from there to Beijing on an Airbus plane that puts most U.S. carriers to shame. When I arrive, there is no relief or sadness.

Cities

On this trip, I only visited three cities – Hong Kong, Guangzhou and Beijing – so it’s difficult to generalize. Yet the change here is palpable, with rapid growth that threatens to obliterate the past, particularly in the modern mainland cities.

Hong Kong, of course, is a force of will. With extremely limited space, surrounded by steep green mountains and a fantastic deep water port, people have simply built up, and up and up, so that they live and work in a forest of buildings. Yet while Hong Kong was a British colony in 1982, it is the one city I saw that has not changed significantly since then. The only difference is ‘more.’ More high rises, more construction including a massive project to infill a part of the harbor with precious land, and more traffic – especially in the ports where ships from all over the world help feed an increasingly consumer driven world. Yet there is also a sense of preservation here. The government of China has managed to preserve the dynamic economy of Hong Kong. More surprising, in some respects, is that the city has managed this development while preserving green parks, lush mountains and intricate neighborhoods with distinct personalities. This balance between progress and preservation is exemplified, I think, by the longest outdoor covered escalator system in the world. Built in 1993, a series of escalators cascades 2,600 feet up and down a steep valley to carry commuters to work. Running past shop displays, gardens and tea houses, the escalator is a wonderfully humane way to get to work and is a nice reminder that progress and preservation are both possible.

Guangzhou, on the other hand, has changed fundamentally. My most significant memory of Guangzhou from 1982 is when our group arrived by train on our return to the U.S. I remember seeing my first full length mirror after months of living in China. It was quite a shock and marked my return to a much more self-conscious Western civilization. Now the city sports mirrors everywhere, electric ornaments hanging from trees and the newly constructed Canton Tower, one of the highest buildings in the world. The tower has a self circulating cooling system and 7,000 LED lights that give it an ever changing multi-colored glow. It practically shouts its own modernity to the world, which is undoubtedly the intention of Guangzhou’s leaders.

The most surprising difference, to me however, was fashion. Where once comrades had a choice of green, blue or gray Maoist uniforms, with an occasional white or pink tee-shirt to make a statement, now the look is Tokyo, or New York, or Akron, Ohio. The introduction of color is a welcome trend, but
something seems to have been lost along the way. People wear jeans, slacks, Tees with clever slogans, lovely blouses, snazzy sunglasses, and everyone under fifty seems to carry a smart phone. The shift seems to reflect both higher living standards and a change in what matters most to people.

As for Beijing, the city I once knew is almost gone. Where there were wide empty boulevards and jammed bicycle paths, now there is a complete reverse. Traffic is endless and the cities are littered with fanciful modern buildings, broad LED screens (including two on Tiananmen Square of all places), and shopping malls that sell designer everything. What is fading are the hutongs, the small neighborhoods of gray tile roofs, coal fire stoves and open air stalls selling strange, delicious, and generally unhealthy food. What I miss most, however, are the pockets of old people sitting and squatting together on the sidewalk among chickens and children. Or gathered around a game of xiangqi, an ancient version of chess, offering endless advice on the next move. As the hutongs give way to high rises, at least in the downtown areas, a way of life seems to be giving was as well. This is not all bad, of course, as progress brings many material advantages. Ask anyone if they would prefer squatting before a charcoal cook-stove to standing over a gas oven. But these great cities risk losing something along the way.

And to say Beijing, or any Chinese city, is more polluted than thirty years ago is both true and to alter the argument. Back then, the real pollution was in the alleys and the shops where people lived and worked. Open drainage ditches, fetid squat toilets and horrendous restaurant hygiene were the norm. The sky was certainly bluer and the rivers were cleaner, but the neighborhoods were far dirtier. People also smoked like chimneys whereas now, thanks to strong government regulations, smoking seems to be on the decline. In other words, pollution in China seems to have shifted from the individual to a more public threat. This is not to suggest that China’s environmental problems are not serious. They are. However, the country is investing heavily in energy efficiency, hybrid cars and alternative fuels. The question, of course, is whether these moves can keep pace with tens of millions of new consumers who want what they see as the good life – which typically includes a car and all the possessions a modern American might desire.

**People**

In 1982, we were stared at constantly. I remember bargaining for melons outside the Forbidden City and turning to find a crowd of thirty staring at the strange *da bizi* (big nose) who could speak Chinese. Or traveling into some regions and knowing I was the first white person many had ever seen. At the same time, it was almost impossible to get help from official personnel. Whether they were government, university, hotel or restaurant officials, the answer was invariably the same: *bu hui*, cannot. Having been corralled by strict government controls for decades, most people had no incentive to serve. Now, I am ignored by strangers and rapid service, at least in the private sector, is the norm. This is a seismic shift in culture. So is the increasingly rapid pace of life, which is fueled by rising ambitions. Back then, the standard personal goals, as Deng Xiaoping proclaimed in 1992, were to own a TV, a refrigerator, and a cassette tape recorder. This was a great advance in ambitions from Mao’s time – when material aspirations were a wristwatch, a bicycle and a foot-powered sewing machine – but a far cry from the cars, iPads and homes of today.
Rising expectations also fuel rising anxieties. At one point on my recent trip, I mentioned to a group of twenty-somethings that people actually seem happier now than they did in 1982. Back then, people struggled for everything from charcoal to paint brushes. Local citizens regularly begged me to buy items for them in the foreigner-only Friendship Stores, where they were not allowed to enter. And the government seemed to intrude on everything, from clothing rations to menstrual cycles (as the country launched its One Family-One Child policy). The result was a population that seemed largely worn down by endless political purges, relentless propaganda and an apparent lack of potential. Now, there is a real sense of hope, pride and confidence that the country as a whole will continue to grow and develop.

Yet the twenty-somethings also said they feel a lot more pressure. Pressure to keep pace with a billion hard charging people, to make enough money to buy a home and car (which are often prerequisites to getting married), and to chart a career. Along with Western fashion, they are also inheriting Western diseases like heart disease and diabetes that are attributable to both diet and a high-pressure life. At the same time, several parents I spoke to said their teenage children don’t seem to believe in anything. The young are skeptical of past policies yet reject a political system that seems closed and corrupt. The result is a social disconnect between past and future that is exacerbated by a dynamic and uncertain present. In other words, beneath the bright and shiny national modernity lies a range of individual anxieties about where this modernization is taking the country.

What Next?

Over dinner at a posh Beijing restaurant, near one of the largest public LED screens in the world that serves as the roof for an open air mall (the photo above actually shows fish swimming over money), several colleagues discussed the future. One friend mentioned a private learning session that Jiang Zemin, the former president of China, held in 2009 with leading Soviet historians. The focus of this mini conference was on lessons learned from the collapse of the Soviet Union. As one might imagine, this question has great significance for China’s leaders. A key lesson, according to my friends, was that Soviet leadership had spent too much time and money on internal security – watching and controlling its people – and not enough cleaning its own political house to engender trust in the government. In some respects, the greatest challenge to China’s growth is its own bureaucracy.

At the same time, China’s sense of self is also being challenged. After flourishing as a civilization for thousands of years, China is more than capable handling any perceived threat, internal or external. Yet, as the country transforms itself from poor to rich nation, the culture – at least in the major cities – is undergoing a visible realignment. To paraphrase the great vaudeville quote: “I’ve been rich and I’ve been poor, and believe me rich is better.” In other words, we should not romanticize the poverty and struggles of 19th and 20th Century China. The country and people are certainly better off than they were 100 or even 30 years ago. But, to coin another phrase: “Be careful what you wish for, it might come true.” One of the primary goals of Deng’s development program, or Mao’s revolution for that matter, was to raise a huge population out of poverty. Now that this is happening, albeit unevenly, the culture must also realign to a distinctly 21st Century nation. In this respect, a popular anti-Western backlash is almost to be expected in the next decade as young and old alike seek to recapture a culture that seems to be under assault by its own desires. What shape such a backlash takes is anyone’s guess. Howevere,
it is likely to touch many areas from fashion to foreign exchange policy. This will certainly affect relations with the West, but should not derail them either. It is simply the natural progression of an emerging power attempting to realign its culture with the expectations of a brave new world.

In short, do I miss the China of thirty years ago? Absolutely. I miss the open space and the slower pace, except at train stations. I miss the commute of a million bicycles and the chaos of a Beijing duck restaurant where we spat on the floor and battled other customers for delicious food. Yet I also think it’s safe to say that no one wants to return to those times. They were tough and repressive in many ways, and most people simply did not have the energy to hope. Now, hope and anxiety are in abundance. In this sense, China has become like many modern nations. The question is how 1.3 billion people will find their place in a changing society while retaining what is wonderfully unique about China.