

24 Years, 10 Days

Written by Dylan Kissane

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DYLAN KISSANE, JUN 14 2013

China is a mess of contradictions.

It is all at once the second largest economy on the planet, industrial and modern, while many of its citizens remain living in the same conditions as their grandparents and great-grandparents. It is a nation of entrepreneurs, a nation of innovators on a global scale, yet also a nation where more than 300 million labour as agricultural workers. To walk the streets of a city like Shanghai and pass bankers and financiers is no shock, yet it is only a short subway ride to the outskirts of the city where the poverty is real, the desperation obvious and a sort of grey pallor covers the buildings, the roads, the polluted canal ways and even the people, too.

As I raced from Shanghai to Beijing this morning on the G12 bullet train these sorts of contradictions became even more stark. Seated comfortably and with more legroom than either the British Airways economy class seat that I rode to China or the equivalent seat on a French TGV would ever allow, I zipped across the Chinese countryside at a steady 300km an hour towards the ancient capital of the Middle Kingdom. I was fascinated by the China I viewed from my window seat in carriage 12 as I saw everything from urban and suburban sprawl to rolling green hills, tourist haunts with their gaudy red and yellow signs, and flooded river valleys where rice paddies stretched as far as I could see. In less than five hours one of the most advanced high-speed trains in the world delivered me from the world's most populous city to one of the few real centers of power in the post-Cold War era.

The voyage offers innumerable opportunities to view construction sites, road building or road widening crews at work, and factories producing the goods and equipment that are driving this economy forward. It also allows the interested tourist opportunities to reflect on the lone farmers with seemingly nothing more than a hoe in their hand working their small plot of land in the same manner his father probably did long before the brilliant white bullet train was ever even conceived.

A little less than a year ago I was walking the Mall in Washington, DC on a rainy morning. A hurricane was headed towards the American north-east and, as luck would have it, I had chosen this particular week to explore the US capital. I wandered the length of the Mall, finding my way eventually to the Lincoln Memorial and mounting the steps where, nearly half a century before, Martin Luther King, Jr had issued a clarion call for a fairer, more just America. His dream became real and I would later make my way to the memorial that bears his name not too far from where he spoke the day he imagined a country where all men would be free at last, free at last.

I recalled this visit to Washington as I stood in Tiananmen Square this evening. To a Westerner like myself Tiananmen is known mostly for what is referred to in China as the June 4th incident. The massacre of dozens, hundreds or even more civilians – no completely verifiable figures exist – by the ironically titled People's Liberation Army on the orders of the Chinese Communist Party leadership on this square and in the streets that flow into it marked the country in the eyes of the world. While the blood was quickly scrubbed from the pavement the stain that it left remained. Sanctions would follow, restrictions on arms sales, too, as the world was reminded just how little dissent the regime in Beijing was willing to entertain.

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There is no Chinese equivalent to Martin Luther King, Jr. The statues found littered through Shanghai and Beijing render homage instead to Mao Zedong, one of the 20th century's greatest mass murderers. Directly and indirectly he is responsible for the deaths of tens of millions, yet it is his round face that looks out over The Bund in Shanghai, his bronze eyes and broad smile that face Pudong and its dozens of skyscrapers as if to suggest that this is all somehow part of the latest Five Year Plan.

It's said you cannot argue with success and China, at least on the face it presents to the world, is succeeding. The POL 410 students I am teaching here have seen all of the graphs this week pointing to the economic miracle that is China post-Deng. Any student of international politics can cite the achievements of the Chinese government in recent years: more than a decade of double digit growth, the elevation of hundreds of millions of citizens from poverty, an expanding middle class and the rapid industrialization of an economy that was, in still living memory, as backward and undeveloped as any other you might care to name. China, it seems, has found a way to make communism work and, in doing so and as everyone from Napoleon to James Kynge have argued, awoken one sixth of humanity and truly shaken the world.

Yet China remains a contradiction.

For all the glitter and gold – and there is plenty of both in this country – it remains a state that suffers under the thuggery of a regime that refuses to offer its people a voice. The men who gathered to give the shoot to kill order in 1989 are not the same as the men who govern China today, but their names matter little – the regime is the same, the party reigns supreme and the people are only important in as much as they contribute to the continued well being of the state.

It's 24 years and 10 days since Chinese soldiers executed Chinese citizens for daring to demand the right to a say in their own future.

I stood tonight in the same place that those students did, wandered along the streets where so many of them fell, and reflected on the contradictions of China. It is both rich and poor, developed and not, a country that this week has launched yet another man into space while imprisoning still more men who challenge the way that their country is run here on Earth.

Perhaps the greatest contradiction of all, though, is that in 24 years and 10 days so much about this country has changed and in so many ways, while yet so much more has sadly and inevitably stayed exactly, and heartbreakingly brutally, the same.

Sent with Writer

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