

China confronts the tensions of Maoism and modernization

By William G. Saywell

After a decade of studying and teaching about China, I finally crossed the border in July 1972, destined for Peking and a year of diplomatic service with the Canadian Embassy. My feeling of elation survived the trip from Hong Kong to Peking — undoubtedly the world's most unnecessarily protracted journey. I soon learned that my language teachers had failed to underline the importance of two Chinese expressions, *deng-i-deng* ("wait a moment") and *xiu-xi* ("have a rest"). I was soon making a mental apology to all those "Old China Hands" whose oft-heard comments on the different Chinese concept of time I had long questioned.

The sense of euphoria that gripped me during the course of that long journey lasted many weeks, and survived the frustrations and problems encountered by the foreign resident getting established in Peking. The China of which I got my first glimpse was very much the China I had pictured, the land about which I had taught, and the country whose present government I, among others, had long publicly urged Canada to recognize.

It is a society which quite literally has been raised from the dust-bin of history — from a century of imperialist aggression, peasant rebellion, revolution, warlordism, Japanese occupation and civil war — to its present position. Today it is a unified, proud and developing society. The China of only a generation ago, in which the masses lived near or below the subsistence line and in which famine brought death or deformity to countless millions, has been radically transformed. In today's China, one quarter of mankind is assured of a decent livelihood, has a new sense of dignity and a renewed sense of national destiny. This alone marks the monumental transformation brought about by the Chinese Revolution — beyond doubt one of modern history's most momentous events.

Mao Tse-tung, and before him Sun Yatsen, borrowed from China's ancient classics an aphorism with which to depict the potential benefits of China's poverty

and backwardness. China, they both wrote, was a "blank page", but upon a blank page the most beautiful of pictures could be painted. Both leaders shared with many of their generation what one historian has called a "Great Leapist" tendency — a feeling that, partly because of China's economic backwardness, it could leap into the twentieth century unshackled by the web of social injustices that in the West emerged as the corollary of industrial revolution. China had before it the lessons of Western capitalism, as well as its technology, with which to escape social injustice while modernizing.

Basis of nationalism

In part, their quest, like that of all twentieth-century Chinese leaders, sprang from the bedrock of nationalism that all shared. China, once the greatest of empires, was more than simply a nation. It could be rebuilt as a truly great civilization. Confucian or Communist: the world view implied a faith in the universality of the ideological underpinnings, however radically different were the ideologies themselves and the societies they supported.

If the "blank-page" image may be pursued, there is no doubt that the Chinese Revolution has painted a picture of the most sweeping dimensions. Although it remains unfinished, Western observers, have tended to colour it black or white.

Dr. Saywell has returned to his post as chairman of the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Toronto after a year spent in China. He was seconded to the External Affairs Department for a year from mid-summer 1972 to August 1973, serving as Sinologist and First Secretary at Canada's Embassy in Peking. Dr. Saywell's main area of research interest has been in the history and politics of twentieth-century China and, in particular, Chinese nationalism and contemporary Chinese foreign policy. The views expressed in this article are those of the author.