

Tiananmen Square was closed to the public. It was Monday 14 March, 2005. The 10th National People's Congress (NPC) was in session. Elected delegates from all of China's provinces were in attendance. They had just voted on the Anti-Secession law. 2,896 delegates had voted in favour of the law. There were two abstentions. No one had opposed the bill.

As I sat in my comfortable room in the Beijing International Hotel I watched the proceedings on CCTV's International service, one of more than 30-television channels on offer. CCTV International provided a service in Chinese and English.

As far as I could tell there was no debate. The delegates simply voted. According to my guide and mentor David Mahui, the NPC delegates met once a year for two weeks. There were a lot of government bills to process. The Anti-Secession Law was just one of them. But clearly it was the most important bill before the Congress.

When the bill was passed the delegates burst into applause.

According to the national English language newspaper the *China Daily* the new law with its 10 articles set a " legal framework to prevent Taiwan from being seceded from China and promote peaceful national reunification."¹

Article two made it plain:" There is only one China in the world. Both the mainland and Taiwan belong to one China. China's sovereignty and territorial integrity brook no division. Safeguarding China's sovereignty and territorial integrity is the common obligation of all Chinese people, the Taiwan compatriots included."²

It was article 8 that caused Western observers most concern. It stated: " In the event that the ' Taiwan independence' secessionist forces should act under any name or by any means to cause the fact of Taiwan's secession from China, or that major incidents entailing Taiwan's secession from China should occur, or that possibilities for a peaceful reunification should be completely exhausted, the state shall employ non-peaceful means and other necessary measures to protect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The State Council and the Central Military Commission shall decide on and execute the non-peaceful means and other necessary measures as provided for in the preceding paragraph and shall promptly report to the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress."³

Premier Wen Jiabao took the press conference that followed. A man of youthful appearance and completely at ease with himself, Premier Wen answered all questions in Chinese. There were some 2,000 journalists from China and abroad covering the 10th National People's Congress. It looked as if they had all been placed in the one large auditorium.

Most of the Chinese reporters' questions were about the economy. There was concern about the Shanghai stock exchange that had been running at a loss for almost four

¹ *China Daily*, Chaoyang District, Beijing 100029, 15 March 2005, p 2.

² Op Cit p3.

³ *ibid*

years. Premier Wen said that he was a close watcher of the Shanghai exchange and was disappointed with its performance. He admitted that the government had a lot to learn about the socialist market economy. It had never been tried before. Premier Wen said the first step was to improve the quality of the listed companies. Then it was necessary to establish an open, fair and transparent securities market. The premier also wanted to improve the regulatory agencies to fight crime and protect investors' interests.

Then CNN asked a question. In my hotel room CNN television broadcast round the clock mainly from its Hong Kong newsroom. The reporter sounded like an Australian. The reporter's question was about the anti-session law. The reporter wanted to know what China meant by non-peaceful means. " And if there is a conflict, a broader conflict with the United States, could China build an Army that could win any war it has to fight, as you stated in your address to the NPC?"⁴

It was a provocative question. Premier Wen took his time to answer. In slow deliberate phrases Premier Wen showed little emotion as he spoke in Mandarin. Before the government interpreter was able to give the premier's reply in English, the auditorium bust into applause. Many of the Chinese reporters were standing as they clapped.

In the following day's copy of *China Daily* the premier's reply was given in full in English. He said in part:

" The compatriots in Taiwan are our own brothers. We hope all the compatriots in Taiwan will understand the intention of the legislation. We also hope that all countries and people in the world who uphold the one-China principle and care for peace and stability in the Taiwan Straits will understand and support the law.

You also asked about the increase in China's military strength. Let me spend a few minutes on this. China pursues a defensive national defence policy. China's military strength, if compared with that of your country (US), in terms of military expenditure, is left far behind. I don't think I have to cite any figures here.

In the recent hundred years, China was subjected to bullying and humiliation. Yet till now our country has never sent a single soldier abroad to occupy an inch of foreign land.

Taiwan is completely China's internal affair. It brooks no interference from any foreign country. We do not want foreign interference. Yet we are not afraid of any."⁵

All this happened in my first 12 hours in China. I was with a party of 17 Australians booked to tour the cities of Beijing, Xi'an and Shanghai. We had arrived at an important moment in the country's history but with 5,000 years of recorded history to look back on it was difficult to know how important this moment was.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

After all the heavy political information on television I decided to go outside to seek some relief on the streets. My hotel room looked south facing a broad, imposing boulevard crowded with modern cars and buses. But even here there was a message. Across the boulevard were two arches with the centrepiece missing. The missing piece would be put in place once Taiwan was again a part of the mainland.

David Mahui was a personable 32-year-old who was the first person from his village to go to university. David's parents had spent their life's savings to get their son through university. After he graduated as a maths teacher he spent his first year's salary building his parents a house, the finest house in the village.

David met his wife at university. In keeping with China's one child policy they had one son. David soon learnt that the income of a maths teacher was not enough to pay for his Beijing apartment and maintain a living standard in keeping with his rising expectations. He offered his services as a tour guide with an Australian tour company. When I met him he had been working with Helen Wong's Tours for five years.

On our second day in Beijing David took us to Tiananmen Square. David told the party that we were lucky that Tiananmen Square was open to the public because it had been closed the day before. There was a passing reference to the NPC meeting closing the square but no mention of the anti-secession law. Helen Wong's Tour information booklet warned that all guides were subject to government examinations. It was part of their remit to make sure we visited at least two approved retail outlets in any one day of our tour.

The sun was shining and although the Beijing temperature hovered at around 10 c there was a happy convivial atmosphere out on the square. I asked David if it was a national holiday. No he said, this was an average crowd for late winter.

During my breakfast reading at the hotel where I selected fried noddles for my first meal of the day I saw reports that Russia, Pakistan and Belarus were supporting the one China policy. The Shanghai Taiwan Investors Association was quoted as saying that the new law was there to "safeguard peaceful reunification." The Chinese information machine was beginning move into top gear in its bid to support the law. The *China Daily* said many countries including the United States, Canada, Russia and Britain have enacted relevant, similar laws."

This claim rang true. I had spent more than 10 years in Canada during Trudeau's premiership. The bilingual policies of the federal government were entirely aimed at keeping Canada whole. Quebec historically and geographically was part of Canada. But what about Taiwan?

David was not ready to debate the issue. He took us across the square where Terry, a large Australian in our party with a Ned Kelly red beard became an instant celebrity. The Chinese people gathered around him and wanted their picture taken posing beside the giant Victorian. One Chinese lady wanted to take Terry home. Terry's wife Julie said no.

Chairman Mao's portrait adorned the entrance to the Imperial Palace. In 1949 the "great helmsman" threw open of the gates with its nine lucky studs on each door to

the public. For 500 years during the Ming and Qing dynasties the Imperial Palace or Gugong was closed to the general public. Inside the emperors entertained themselves with 3,000 concubines ranging in age from 13 to 17. Twice a year the emperors visited the Tiantan or Temple of Heaven. Here the emperors spent a night of fasting and celibacy and made animal and human sacrifices. I noted in my travel journal that David made much of the fact that the Chinese worshipped a god in heaven but I wondered who this god was who welcomed animal and human sacrifices?

Freedom of religion is practised in China. I saw Christians, Buddhists and Muslims all attending services. There are other important freedoms. There is a consumer association in China. The largest numbers of complaints handled by the consumer association are about mobile telephones. Less than 20 years ago there was not even a decent telephone system in the country. Now most families have mobile phones. In the last 10 years more than half of China's mobile phones are made locally. Not all these phones work as well as they should. The consumers' association had lobbied the government to improve standards.⁶

There might be a consumers' association but it did not protect consumers from fake goods. Whenever our party was out and about we were constantly pestered by street sellers. Most of these street sellers carried smart aluminium cases of fake Rolex watches. One of our party collected watches. He bought some on the street. Within 24 hours the sweep hand fell off. I bought a Rolex. The three small dials in the centre of the watch were stuck on but otherwise the battery-operated watch is keeping good time. In addition to fake Rolex watches, there are fake Gucci handbags, fake Burberry scarves and Hermes goods. Admittedly the Beijing local authority is cracking down on traders at the refurbished Silk Market but trading in fake goods is a way of life on the streets. It's difficult to know how you would negotiate a successful Free Trade Agreement in these circumstances.

When we visited a Beijing hutong for lunch Madam Wu trotted out her best china and served seven courses. A comely lady with wide hips Madam Wu might have enjoyed her own cooking too much. She suffered from high blood pressure. Her family had lived in the hutong for four generations. The small single storey houses and narrow lanes were once the centre of life for Beijingers. Now they are making way for smart high rises and multi-lane expressways. Each hutong entrance had its own characteristic entrance. A high threshold to keep the ghosts out was an indication of the resident's importance. Four beams across the top of door indicated some one of great influence. In the old days when the community matchmaker made her rounds the doorways were an important reference and resulted in the expression a "door match marriage." All of the hutongs are rented. There was no heating that I could see. When it got cold, as it often did in Beijing, the people living inside put on more clothes.

Madam Wu was hospitality itself. She was clearly pleased to be able to entertain her 17 foreigners. But when one in our party asked her if she watched any American films on her DVD machine there was a moment's silence and then Madam Wu had to excuse herself. David explained that Madam Wu needed to take her blood pressure tablets

⁶ Op Cit *China Daily* 16 March 2005 p 2 China Consumers Association web site www.sohu.com.

When I got back to my hotel room and looked out across Jianguomennei Dajie after midnight there was hardly a car in sight. All the time I was in Beijing I did not hear a police siren once. During the day the movement of the traffic was extraordinary. David said there were some 10 million bicycles in Beijing. The bikes, cars, buses and trucks all moved forward like a great river. They simply flowed along, seeking the line of least resistance. There was no honking of horns or road rage. I was beginning to learn something about Chinese values and national characteristics.

At Xi'an I began to get a proper appreciation of Chinese history. Xi'an is one of the world's oldest cities. It has existed for nearly 2,000 years. Once an imperial capital Xi'an was the seat of government for Emperor Qin Shi Huang (221-206 BC) the first Emperor to unite China. It was Emperor Qin who spent nearly 40 years and 700,000 men building his mausoleum east of Xi'an that contained the army of terracotta warriors. This mausoleum was an underground city with its own sky of stars made of pearl shell and rivers of mercury. Some of the Emperor's favourite concubines were buried with him while they were still alive.⁷

It was at Xi'an where I discovered that the Chinese were using chrome thousands of years before we invented it. I was beginning to understand what the long view meant. A century was a hardly a blip on the Chinese radar screen.

Before we got to Shanghai we were all prepared for what we were told was China's most Western city. The history of the Opium Wars and the colonial concessions was well remembered and respected in Shanghai. Along the Bund, an Anglo/Indian word for embankment, the old colonial concession buildings were floodlit. For a moment I thought it was forgive and forget. Then our Shanghai guide Tong took us for a walk along the Bund. She pointed to a modest garden beside the Bund.

" See that garden there," she said. " It was built by the British. It had a sign no dogs or Chinese."

In my hotel room at the Ramadan on Jiujiang Road there was a book published by a British company as a guide for visiting business people. The book was a fund full of information. It said Shanghai was the world's third busiest port after Singapore and Hong Kong. It also claimed that the city was sinking a centimetre a year into the river clay with the weight of the building that was going on. Across the river in the Pudong New Area where the Oriental Pearl TV Tower demands immediate attention, some \$70 billion American dollars is being spent on redevelopment. Volkswagen and General Motors have both entered into joint ventures with State Operated Enterprises (SOE) producing an endless stream of smart cars that clog Shanghai's expressways. There are some two million cars in Shanghai. There are three ring roads around Shanghai part of a road system much better than anything we have in Australia.

The Chinese economy is on the move. On CCTV International I watched a former member of the Clinton administration in deep conversation with his Chinese interviewer. The official whose name I didn't catch was introduced as a friend of China but his message was more desperate than friendly. The American was worried

⁷ *China*, Insight Guides, London, first edition 1990, updated 2005, pp 186-187

about reports that China planned to get rid of its huge holding of American dollars and buy Euros. The American insisted that the balance of trade was very much in China's favour and the sale of the American dollars would be seen by Washington as an unfriendly act.

When the American Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice visited Beijing at the end of her first Asian tour as Secretary of State, she was all smiles and benevolence. The *China Daily* said that the American Secretary of State supported the one China policy. Premier Wen was never publicly pressed about selling the country's American dollars for Euros but he was asked about floating the Yuan. Premier Wen said that the time wasn't right to float the Yuan. It would upset relations with its neighbouring nations.

At his Beijing press conference Premier Wen, with a Churchillian touch, warned his people about the problems ahead. He said:

" Our nation has gone through so many disasters and hardships in history that we are now blessed with the essence of urgency, determination for survival and aspirations for peace and development. Our country is so big, problems so numerous and complicated. And we, as a nation, must have courage to overcome difficulty, confidence to win and dauntless spirit to work hard and prevail."⁸

The character of the Chinese people as I saw it did not exactly match Premier's Wen mould. There was pride in what the nation had achieved in the last 30 years since China was opened to the West but there were also the traditional qualities of patience and harmony. These qualities were best demonstrated by the way the traffic system worked.

The generation who were identified in the Chinese press as the " Little Emperors" those who were born since the one child policy was introduced in the mid-1970s are fascinated with Western products and services. There are some 1,200 KFC outlets in China. A couple in our party wanted a pizza in Xi'an. They found there was a 20-minute wait before they could be served because of the crowd waiting to get in.

But the "Little Emperors" have problems of their own. According to the *China Daily* after being raised without siblings many are lacking the necessary social skills to raise their own children. China's 1.3 billion population is expected to peak in 2020.

Modern China is clearly not what Chairman Mao originally intended. But the people still honour the " great helmsman." I got the impression that Mao's memory was being honoured in much the same way as the emperors of earlier dynasties. The Chinese took a quiet pride in their history. *The Subterranean Army of Emperor Qin Shi Huang* might not have a catchy title but there is no denying its enthusiasm for its subject.

In the introductory chapter the author writes:

" Two thousand years have since passed, but the name of Qin Shi Huang has been kept alive in the mind of all Chinese, just as the name of Napoleon rings out to the French and the tales of the Pyramids still enchant modern Egyptians. Politicians have

⁸ *China Daily*, 15 March 2005 published full transcript of press conference p 3.

taken an interest in his political ambitions, gains and losses; ordinary people are more interested in his unusual life."⁹

Mao still lies in state in Tiananmen Square. More than one million people have filed past since he was first placed there in 1976. But it was not in Beijing where Mao's great revolutionary movement started. It was in Shanghai.

Our guide Tong decided that we could not leave Shanghai without a visit to the Memorial House of the First National Congress of the Communist Party in China. Some of our party were amused to find that we had to pay to get in. The house is located in what was formerly known as the French concession of Shanghai. On July 23, 1921, 13 delegates including Mao Zedong, met secretly to agree their plan for the formation of the Chinese Communist Party. The authorities heard about the plan and the delegates were forced to abandon the house and meet on a pleasure boat where the Communist Party of China (CPC) was formed on July 30.¹⁰ The Communist Party of Australia (CPA) was formed one year earlier in 1920.

On the flight home I chatted with an American who lived in Singapore. He was a representative of a Boston company with factories in many Asian countries including China. I suggested that a joint venture with the Chinese looked like a good business proposition. The American smiled. He said his company refused to go into Chinese joint ventures for fear of losing its best people and ideas.

Just as Britain was the dominant power in the 19th century and the United States was the dominant power in the 20th century there is no doubt in my mind that China will become the dominant power of the 21st century. But from what I saw China's conquests will not be the result of any military sabre rattling. It will be the result of wily trading. Mark Vaile had better watch out.

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⁹ *The Eight Wonder of the World*, China Travel and Tourism Press, April 2004, p 10.

¹⁰ Information taken from museum leaflet Web site www.shcm.com/SHCRM/yidahuizhi/default.htm.