

## WORLDLY JEREMIAHS

### The Paper Dragon

A morning-after atmosphere is settling into American perceptions of China. After nearly a decade of believing that China would serve any purpose and solve all U.S. problems, there is a new sense of realism—perhaps even melancholy—about what the opening of China means.

It is not hard to catalogue the romance's headier moments: China's divorce from the USSR, Kissinger's secret rendezvous, Nixon's wooing of Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai; Deng Xiaoping's honeymoon trip to the U.S., where, like a presidential candidate, he posed in cowboy hats. Businessmen and the press swooned at the thought of the expected dowry in trade and profits. And among our elites a trip to Peking counted as two points in the game of one-upmanship that we all play. By 1980, if you hadn't been photographed at the Great Wall shouting curses northward at the Polar Bear like Brzezinski, you simply were not "in." For Nixon, Ford, Carter, and perhaps for all America, China was a bright spot, a touch of love in a world made up of Vietnamese soldiers, ayatollahs, Sandinistas, hunger strikers, and recalcitrant allies. We needed the China opening the way a jilted lover needs to be seen with a new love after the breakup.

According to one poll, by 1980 that love had reached such a point of blindness that 34 per cent of the American people believed China was not Communist. The same poll indicated that 54 per cent believed China was our largest trading partner. So hyped and breathless was the media reportage that the word "Communist" nearly disappeared from the description of China and Deng, and his followers were portrayed as if they were scions of Eastern-establishment families. The press actually referred to the humiliation of Chiang J'ing, Mao's widow, as a "trial."

When the posters on Democracy Wall disappeared, and presumably the poster-writers with them, the press spoke of Deng as "pragmatic" and "feisty" and featured stories about communes and factories that idealized China's good life. The media even applauded when Deng announced his ten-year, \$250 billion modernization program and failed to ask why, after thirty years of Communist rule, modernization was now necessary. To ask *that* question would have meant admitting that the pretty heiress we courted was penniless.

The one benefit of all this wooing is that it forced both sides to unveil themselves a little. Gradually it became apparent that the Chinese dragon was really a paper one. Behind the veil lay a China that was as poor as the poorest nations in the world—a nation technologically backward, whose education system had been destroyed in the chaos of the Cultural Revolution and whose military was as outdated as any banana republic's. Far from being a strategic "card," China had all the earmarks of a strategic liability, one that would require a massive transfusion of aid and expertise before it could play its role as a counter-

weight to the Soviet Union.

Not that the Chinese lied about their poverty. Deng Xiaoping's modernization program was an honest effort to admit by implication that China was indeed poor. By 1980 its leaders were pouring forth a host of statistics that spelled out the problem. For example, in 1979 the mainland government announced that as many as a million people may be malnourished, that forty million were unemployed and countless others underemployed. In 1980 the original estimates of Chinese per capita income were revised downward to about \$227 per capita, on a par with India and Pakistan. (The fact that China uses "estimates" reflects the primitiveness of its national income statistics.) Indeed, in 1979 a vice-premier named Chen Yun announced that per capita income in the rural area, where 90 per cent of China's people live, was \$48—a level close to that of Benin or Bangladesh.

Militarily it is estimated that China needs \$50-60 billion to raise the military from its current World War II backwardness to a level of technological skills equal to those of the South Korean Army. So far from a threat to the USSR is the Chinese military that even Vietnam's regional forces were able to inflict terrible casualties in the 1979 border clash, and Taiwan with its small population retains military superiority in the straits between Taiwan and the mainland. (Most of the Soviet divisions on China's border are not fully manned, some are at a third of their normal strength, and over half of these divisions are deployed to the east around Vladivostok facing Japan, not China. While China requires a watchful Soviet eye, it has become clear that at present China is not tying down excessive numbers of Soviet troops.)

A recent Defense Intelligence report indicated that China's economy took a turn for the worst in 1980, with 10-20 per cent of the urban workforce unemployed and 15-20 per cent inflation. Oil production and industrial output were on the downturn. By 1981, 20 per cent of all the factories China had ordered from abroad (with so much press ballyhoo in 1978) had been cancelled. The report concluded that China had "a champagne appetite" but had to live within "a beer budget."

Nevertheless it is all to the good that the opening of China has unveiled the poverty behind the bamboo curtain. Now we have a set of facts that requires a sober reassessment of China's role in world affairs. The facts make us realize that China is a developing country that will need all the help it can get.

A political question that no longer can be avoided is whether China's present regime can bring about modernization or whether China will have to change politically so that a different economic model can be employed. Only China can answer that question, but Americans should take note of it.

At issue is whether we have recognized China or the current regime. If the latter, we may be disappointed. But if it is China that we care about, we will weather the political storms that are bound to arise and stay loyal, not to a regime, but to a people.

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