

REFLECTIONS ON MY TRIP TO CHINA IN 1971, AND THE EVENTUAL VICTORY OF THE 'CAPITALIST ROADERS'

By Barry York, Posted on C21st Left, August 19, 2020

<https://c21stleft.com/2020/08/19/reflections-on-my-trip-to-china-in-1971-and-the-eventual-victory-of-the-capitalist-roaders/>



An old comrade and friend recently wrote some of his reflections on his trip to China in 1978. This prompted me to write about my own time there, a month in May 1971. I was one of 19 Australians on a delegation organized by the Australia-China Friendship Society. Our aim was to promote the campaign for the establishment of diplomatic relations with China. Nearly all of us were sympathetic to the Chinese revolution, and a core was Maoists. The tour leader was the communist leader of Melbourne's wharfies, Ted Bull. He often called in Jim Bacon and I for discussions on the trip, which makes me think we were his 'deputies'.

My friend's account of China in 1978, when he went there, makes me realize how quickly things can change. I must say that I disagree with his assessment of Deng Xiaoping as a 'great man'. I take the opposite view, and shall explain why in relation to the features in China that attracted and inspired me back then, in 1971.

My memories of the 1971 trip remain strong for a number of reasons. Firstly, during the 1970s, I gave talks and showed my slides about the trip on more than a

hundred occasions. I only had a cheap 'plastic' camera but took 400 photographic slides. Incidentally, I was never stopped from taking photos over there.

In 1971, there was great interest in 'Red China' in Australia and it was sensational for any Australian to have ventured beyond 'the Bamboo Curtain'. I remember a neighbor in my street in Brunswick asking, with great concern, as to whether I was worried that they might not let me out. I explained to the neighbor that China wanted a more open relationship with the world and that it was the Australian government that had placed tight restrictions on ordinary people travelling there.

During the 1980s and 1990s, I continued to show my slides but much less frequently. I last showed them about five years ago when some Chinese friends of a friend were visiting Australia and my friend told me the visitors would love to see slides of their homeland from way back in 1971. Their reactions to my commentary and slides suggested that 'the past (really) is a foreign country – they do things differently there'. The visitors were very loyal to the current philosophy and policies of the Chinese Communist Party and had a kind of nostalgic attachment to the Mao period.

A few years prior to that I had shown the slides to one of the mums at the local school. My wife had told her that I had been to China and met Zhou Enlai. This young mum, whose parents were Chinese and had lived through the Cultural Revolution, was thrilled to meet me and to see the slides. She was gushing with enthusiasm to meet someone who had actually shaken the hand of the late Premier. Born years after Zhou's death, she none the less gushed: "We Chinese LOVE Premier Zhou!"

My memories were also kept alive by an oral history project I recorded for the National Library in 2013 in which I interviewed several of those who were on the 1971 trip. Their memories and reflections, from the perspective of 'now', were fascinating and revived more of my own recollections. Later, I persuaded the Library to allow me to record the memories of members of the Australian table tennis team – the 'ping-pong diplomats' – who we met in Beijing in May 1971. It was another fascinating project. One of the players described to me the difference in the attitude of the everyday people in the eastern bloc, where he had also competed in table tennis, and those in China. The vibe of enthusiasm in China was a marked contrast, he told me, to the drabness and crushing sense of alienation in East Germany and other Soviet bloc countries.

I could relate to what he said because, wherever we went in China, the vibe in the streets was one of friendliness, happiness, engagement and curiosity. Perhaps all this was staged, but there were times when it couldn't have been – such as when Jim Bacon and I told our guides in Shanghai that we wanted to go shopping and that we were confident we could manage on our own without a guide or interpreter. It is a humorous but insightful anecdote that I always tell with my slide show (but too long and complicated to take up space here). We were more or less mobbed by the locals, many of who sported Mao badges and all of whom seemed very happy people. I can imagine their vibe was not terribly different to that in other

revolutionary societies, including the unleashing of enthusiasm during and immediately after the English civil war and the period in America when the British were defeated and Washington elected unanimously by the Congress as the first President.

Anyway all this has kept the memories alive for me.

Like my old friend, I was keen to see socialism in action. I had read a fair bit of theory and there were detailed accounts by westerners like the American communist **William Hinton** who had spent long periods living there among the peasants and workers, poet **Rewi Alley** and novelist **Han Suyin**, and scholarly works by **Joan Robinson**, professor of economics at Cambridge University. It was Robinson's book on the cultural revolution, published in 1968, that influenced me in terms of the Maoist view of the relationship between the economic base of a society and its superstructure. The deterministic brand of Marxism that saw the relationship as a one-way street was rejected by Mao and developed into a nuanced understanding that the superstructure, the culture, customs, and habits, can impact on the base of a society with such power as to turn it into its opposite (i.e., under socialism, restoring capitalist social relations of production).

The source of the regressive impact was not 'socialist' but feudalist. In terms of 'custom' etc. that reflects and in turn pushes the ongoing development of socialism, we are talking of a lengthy process (which is why Mao spoke of the need for many cultural revolutions). Feudalism was collectivist because there was no other choice: the individual, rights, and expectations being severely constrained. And it was this cultural drag that was able to present aspects of itself as 'socialist'. The communists were waging a struggle on two fronts – against feudal ideas and practices (the latter of these especially because they can present themselves as ideologically free zones) and the emerging bourgeois ones that were also able to present themselves as revolutionary (and to the degree they were anti-feudal, they were).

Thus, it made sense to wage 'cultural revolution' against those in the communist party who sought to perpetuate bourgeois values of selfishness over serving the people, competitiveness over cooperation, and personal acquisition of great wealth, as a virtue. The much-promoted slogan for the socialist ethic at the time was 'Serve the people'.

I could readily relate to this distinctively Maoist outlook for two main reasons: I was very much the "Arts" type and into subjectivity. I was easily moved by music, film and poetry. I loved expressing myself through writing and art and music. Mao emphasized human agency in the materialist dialectic. Marx had dealt with the power of subjectivity in the interaction between base and superstructure in footnotes – Mao pushed it centre-stage at a time when socialism was being built in China. Secondly, I felt part of a youth rebellion in the late 1960s. It took many forms, from rock music to opposition to censorship and rejection of notions of obedience. I grew my hair long. One day, walking along my street in Brunswick, a

bloke in a Holden drove by, slowed down, and yelled out, "Get a haircut, ya poofa!" From that day on, I pledged to myself I'd be a 'long hair'. (Even now, when Nature has placed a prohibition on me doing so, I at least like to grow a pony-tail). This 'youth revolt' was global and, as in China, we were challenging the old assumptions and the old ways. So, I went to China in 1971 very keen to see this playing out.

William Hinton's book, '**Fanshen**', based on his life with a commune, was a very detailed description of daily routines under conditions of land redistribution and 'New Democracy', with power placed in the hands of the people through revolutionary committees – similar to Russia's earlier soviets – in which workers and peasants could directly elect their managers and recall them at any time by popular vote. These committees elected representatives to higher bodies and, in turn, they elected representatives still higher up. But the beauty of the revolutionary committee system, to me, was that the workers and peasants had a real say in the economic direction of their local community and the bigger society. It was the exact opposite power structure to that in Australia and other capitalist societies where, at best, you might have a corporation appointing a union boss to a board of management.

So, I was keen to see how these revolutionary committees worked.

I won't go into detail here – I could write much more about all this – but I'll list five principal features of China's revolutionary life that inspired me and that I experienced during May 1971.

1. **The revolutionary committees.** We met with cadres from two such committees (from memory) and one that I remember clearly (again, thanks to the slide showings) was based in a rolling stock and locomotive factory. The workers had produced surplus stock and the revolutionary committee convened a mass meeting to decide what the workers wanted to do with the surplus. We were told they decided to donate it to the government of Tanzania, where a railway was being built. The socialist ethic of 'serving the people' was not nationalistic but based on international solidarity. I returned to Melbourne and to La Trobe University with an almost evangelical zeal to convey what I knew about the revolutionary committees. One of our student demands was for 'student power'. We even had to struggle for a student representative on the governing body of the university – indeed, in 1969, I received my first penalty for political protest on the campus when I was 'severely reprimanded' for being part of a deputation that 'invaded' the Council chambers during a Council meeting to demand student representation. We also wanted students to have the right to observe Council meetings.
2. **Big Character Posters.** These were, in a sense, the Internet of the day. While the Cultural Revolution was dying down in 1971, with Mao concerned

about the ultra-leftists and violence between the various 'true Maoist' factions, the **Big Character posters** were apparent in schools and streets. These were forms of grass-roots expression, usually expressing local grievances and/or criticizing capitalist-roaders within the communist party. The posters were something that anyone could do – hence my analogy with the Internet.

3. **Who needs a Navy?** I'll never forget meeting with party cadres and discussing the military threats to China from the Soviet social-imperialists (the Ussuri River border being a dangerous hot spot where fighting had broken out in 1969) and from the US imperialists in Indo-China and the Pacific. We were told that China's military strategy was entirely defensive and based on the Peoples Liberation Army and civil defense. My ears pricked up when mention was made of a coastal naval defense force. I asked, "Why doesn't China have a conventional Navy – why just a small coastal guard?" The reply, which I'll never forget, was that "China does not need a Navy because we have no intention of expanding our interests beyond China. We shall never become imperialist! Only imperialists need a large powerful Navy!"
4. **Social ownership of property and poverty/progress.** When Marx spoke of 'private property' he meant the means of production, not one's spectacles or shoes. China's communes were based on collective ownership of land once owned by individuals and formerly run in pursuit of maximizing the profit to the landlords. Socialism is social ownership of means of production. When that is lost, then you no longer have socialism. The grass-roots' enthusiasm that I saw in China, and that people like William Hinton, Han Suyin and Rewi Alley wrote about based on experience living there, confirmed to me that society does not need greed or the pursuit of individual profit as a motivator for innovation. I saw things that were indicators of progress, especially in housing and, at the same time, I also saw a level of poverty that did not exist anywhere in Australia's regions and cities. This was not disillusioning, though, because I knew, from works like Edgar Snow's '**Red Star over China**', what conditions had been like for the peasants pre-1949, when they had to eat bark off trees or hand over their children to landlords in lieu of rent. We met elderly folk who recalled the bad old days, usually with tears, and who described how their personal lives had changed for the better. Yes, they could have been party stooges, reciting by rote what the party bosses were forcing them to say. If that were the case, then China had some truly magnificent actors, individuals worthy of Academy awards. They seemed very genuine to me.

On the topic of progress, I'll relate an episode when we visited a waterfront. With the assistance of an interpreter, Ted Bull was invited to speak to the Chinese waterside workers. Ted began by telling them that conditions on the wharves in Melbourne were superior to what he had seen in China. I was rather surprised by his frankness. He explained that this had been achieved by struggle, hard struggle, over many decades. He said that they had to

struggle because the waterside workers were more or less 'owned' for the period of their labour by the ship owners and other capitalists. He told the Chinese workers that the big difference in China was that they had much greater 'ownership' of themselves as a class and could thus progress through struggle of a different kind, such as the struggle to develop better ways of improving safety on the job and better ways of innovating and producing stuff. He hardly needed to point out that socialist China had begun from a far less developed starting-point.

5. Politics in command – It is right to rebel! In 1971, there were still signs of revolutionary enthusiasm such as big character posters and anti-imperialist and anti-racism billboards. Whenever we met with cadres, they were intensely political – politics was in command. The politics was based on dialectical understanding – the cadres often spoke about the on-going struggle between the two lines within the communist party. The notion of rebellion as a positive value struck me – but I may have been projecting my own values onto the situation. One would have to live there for many years to grasp anything like that – as William Hinton did. In 1971 I was living and breathing politics as an activist at La Trobe University, and had been since 1968/69. A highly politicized society strikes me as an engaged one: a participatory democracy. Apathy and cynicism are tantamount to surrender. Our struggles at La Trobe had no room for either.

Those five features, whether accurate or not, and whether a product of idealised rose-coloured glasses or not, struck me as essentials of socialism, of the dictatorship of the proletariat (i.e., the replacement of the rule by the 0.1% with the rule of the 99.9%); things that would really take off with even greater success under conditions of advanced industrial capitalism. There was occasionally theoretical discussion in Melbourne about whether it was possible to 'jump' mature capitalist development from a semi-feudal society into socialism. At the time, I believed it was possible.

But each of those five features was gradually reversed following the coup – 'regime change' – after Mao's death in 1976. And this leads me to why I have no time at all for Deng Xiaoping, the architect of 'capitalism with Chinese characteristics'.

At the time of the coup in China, I merely followed the party line, the CPA(ML) line. I'd been like that for too many years – an obedient follower rather than a critical reflective thinker, researcher and debater. That was the negative of my experience for most of the 1970s. Dogmatism, group think, formula-thinking, failure to investigate and think for myself... and worst of all: obedience. I may have still called myself a 'Maoist' but I was far from being one. Of course, to rebel within the CPA(ML) was not easy and had bad personal consequences, especially if you were

dependent on a social life based around others who also tended to have become dogmatic and obedient. (I could write a book about this period).

To the extent that I did think about it in the late 1970s and early 1980s, I regarded the rise of Deng as a positive move; something along the lines of Lenin's New Economic Policy and the beginning of a modernization process (something Mao had wanted and which was clearly needed) rather than a regime change ushering in a completely different path. I would have agreed with the idea that Deng was a 'great man'. The 'Gang of Four', I speculated (in the absence of any investigation or evidence), were ultra-leftists who put sloganeering above economic development. Closer to home, we had the Red Eureka Movement, who supported the Gang of Four – and (nearly) everyone in the party knew they were 'no good' and heaven help you if you suggested, even mildly, that they might have had a few good points. And, further, their 'leader', Albert Langer, was a CIA agent – a definite fact according to Duncan Clarke and other veterans. Of course, it was nonsense (and I'm ashamed to say I went along with such nonsense, for too long).

My doubts about Deng were slow to develop and I was able to question what had happened more freely after I resigned from the party late in 1980 or early 1981. I opened my mind to different possibilities about him and followed events in China more closely. And listened to the range of opinions and analyses on offer.

Something that struck me as strange was that the western media, almost unanimously, praised Deng and admired him. This usually doesn't happen to genuine communists while they are alive. They are usually vilified and demonized by the capitalist press. But, no, Deng was almost heroic to some pro-capitalist western outlets: he was 'opening up' China's economy by facilitating a market aspect. Well, I figured, maybe that is needed. Let's see.

Then, in the early 1980s, I learned that the revolutionary committees had been disbanded in 1978 – not by the workers and peasants but from above. The revolutionary committees had formed the backbone of China's New Democracy for more than a decade. No wonder the capitalist media was glowing in their admiration for Deng. In 1982, I also read about how the Chinese regime had **banned the Big Character posters**. This was done as part of the revision of the Constitution no less. Apparently, genuine rebellious types in China were using the posters to challenge the corruption that grew with the new market direction. Defiantly, other rebellious types revived them seven years later and, despite being unlawful, they became ubiquitous during the June Fourth protests in 1989.

It seemed to me that China under Deng's influence might be going down the capitalist road as had happened in the Soviet Union but it didn't preoccupy me as an issue. I was now living and studying in Sydney, enjoying life more, and this issue only arose for me through my reading of 'Vanguard' and newsletters of the Red Eureka Movement and occasional contact with former and current party members who wanted to talk about it.

I was easily influenced by others during the 1980s but I had at least started thinking again. I suppose 'confused' would be the best word to describe myself at that time. I'd read damning stuff about 'the real Mao' and been influenced by that, and then a counterpoint would come along and I'd feel okay about him again. The western media rightly portrayed Deng in contradistinction to Mao. They got that right. Either way, I still adhered to the values embodied in those five features of China in 1971 that impressed me so much. I still believed that socialism could work and offered something better, more innovative and productive, less alienating, more democratic and more conducive to the development of the full human being, than capitalism.

Then came another clangor for Deng in my eyes. "To get rich is glorious". Really? Glorious? What happened to the socialist ethic: Serve the people? In 1986 in a Sixty Minutes interview, Deng did not deny saying that but tried to justify it by claiming he meant "For society to get rich is glorious". In the context of the widening of the market economy under the reforms he supported, it was entirely plausible that what he meant was individuals getting rich was glorious. This is certainly supported by his other claim: "Let some people get rich first".

And what was happening to the communist slogan, 'Keep politics in command'? According to Deng, it was a case of "It doesn't matter whether the cat is black or white so long as it catches mice".

SAY WHAT??!!

During the 1980s, I had friends who visited China. Gone were the days of the early 1970s when the tourist industry was barely developed over there (which actually meant a greater degree of freedom for tourists, as I found in 1971). In the 1980s, the tourist industry was becoming large and sophisticated, and more controlled. Anecdotal evidence from my friends indicated that there had been a profound cultural change in China, reflecting the development of market capitalism. My friends would complain about how on every street corner in Beijing or Nanjing or wherever, someone was trying to sell you something. Everyone, they said, seemed to be out to make a fast buck. "To get rich is glorious"!

Still, around the mid-1980s, I still wouldn't have felt confident to argue with anyone about all this. But then, in 1989, something happened to clinch it all: a ghastly massacre of young students and workers who had occupied Tiananmen Square to protest against government corruption. In rolled the tanks. And even the corpses were crushed.

A perennial question for any leftist confronted me: whose side was I on? Against the insistence of a handful of party loyalists (who struck me as increasingly eccentric) that it was all a foreign plot, I sided with the rebels, the protestors, the courageous ones, the ones without the tanks, the 'long hairs'. And it wasn't only because some sang 'The Internationale'. It was because their cause was just, and

their suppression despicable and completely unjust. (The Waterdale Road demonstrations from La Trobe University in 1970, which were violently attacked by police who made two arrests at gunpoint, were a pleasant afternoon tea party by comparison).

In my eyes, Deng – who was chairman of the central military commission in 1989 and had argued for swift military intervention – was clearly a social-fascist. Mao would have described him as such.

Marxist William Hinton's book, '[The Great Reversal: the privatization of China, 1978-1989](#)' provides an abundance of evidence and elaboration for all the above. He lived and worked there for many years, including during the 1980s.

On the Cultural Revolution, I recommend Mobo Gao's '[The battle for China's past](#)' and Dongping Han's '[The unknown Cultural Revolution: life and change in a Chinese village](#)' for evidence-based alternatives to the mainstream understanding promoted through the media and universities.