Chinese people have new world view

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In September 2000 the Institute sponsored Global Executive Forum: Hong Kong 2000, attended by 40 Global Advisory Board members and guests. Board member Hon. Ronald Arculli of Hong Kong was the host, and he arranged an outstanding set of briefings which are summarized in this Forum report.

Following the Forum, most of the group continued on a study tour of China, followed by a visit to Lhasa, Tibet. We blended briefings, plant tours, and discussions with historical and cultural events in Shanghai, Xian, Beijing, Wuhan, Chengdu, and a three-day cruise on the Yangtze, including a visit to the Three Gorges Dam project, the largest in the world. Some of these activities are included in the Forum report, our most comprehensive report to date, and we hope the insights of the speakers and other experts add to the understanding of Hong Kong, China and the issues that tie them together.

What is more difficult to report is the set of impressions we took from China, especially for those of us who have visited before. Most of our group had never been to China, although all were experienced in global travel. China has been such a dominant player on the world stage these last two decades that we all had impressions and some long held opinions of what it is and where it is headed. I believe all of us were astounded by what we saw.

My own perspective is based upon visits in 1987 and 1989, when I led delegations of business leaders from Colorado, and shorter visits in the mid 1990s to Southeast China.

When we visited in the 1980s, the only vehicles we saw in Beijing were military and diplomatic. The major cities and their citizens were monochromatic. The 8 million bicycles in Beijing were all the same model, same color (black), and all proceeded in large commuting herds at about 5 mph. Bikes were used to transport crops to market and entire families -- as many as five on one bike -- to work and school. With few exceptions, citizens wore blank expressions and bland clothing as they plodded through life.

In October 2000, the main streets of Beijing and Shanghai felt more like Washington DC and New York than our memories of the 1980s. Citizens of these Chinese cities were dodging autos, which jammed every street, while they talked on cell phones. They wore colorful fashions, had styled hair and the young people had a "way of being" that seemed most familiar to any American and quite different from their own parents and grandparents.

Clearly the people had taken on a new world view, different from their counterparts of a decade earlier. Internet cafes and international publications, combined with TV, have brought the world to the Chinese.

One caveat: we were advised that the areas we toured in these cities were not typical, and that if we ventured several blocks in any direction we would discover a "different" China. I believe that, but even the "different" China appears much better off than a decade ago.

Shanghai has developed so dramatically that it was difficult to recognize. In 1989 we spent hours on a bus to get around the city on primitive roads dominated by people and bikes, not vehicles. Today, several freeways have reduced the crowding on surface streets. Nanjing Road, the main shopping street, is now a pedestrian mall and includes all the global brands as well as the Chinese counterparts.
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The Pudong area, across the river, was a rundown industrial area mixed with agriculture back in 1989. In 2000 we stayed on the 81st story of the Grand Hyatt and looked out over the $30 billion of infrastructure investments over the last decade and the dozens of skyscrapers designed by world class architects, a true city of the future.

The street markets that existed in China in the late '80s are still there and still thriving, but the quality of all the goods seems higher. The booths, not unlike the booths we see at country fairs, are the markets' "fixed assets." They are there all the time and the merchants come each day and set up their displays.

Finally, I noticed a difference in the people and their level of freedom. In 1987 every meeting we had included a CEO who ran the factory or the bank branch. But the meeting also included the requisite Communist Party secretary and he or she had most of the power. Although the power was shifting in the late 1980s, there was still a bias that it was more important that the bike factory had "pure Party thoughts and discipline" for its workers than if the factory produced high quality bikes.

On this trip there was little evidence of the party secretary's influence. Rather, there were a lot of people working their butts off and trying to figure out how to be competitive. Their lives were measurably better than a decade ago and they had new aspirations for their lives. That said, they still led lives of hard work and would be considered poor by U.S. standards.

In the 1980s, there wasn't enough food to feed the people. Now there is plenty of food, and people are focused on acquiring household items and luxuries such as cell phones, furniture, refrigerators and color TVs. The government is trying to get citizens to buy their apartments and giving them subsidies to do so.

This was a profound experience for all of us. China is still a poor country, and millions of folks have lost their jobs and wander in and out of the major cities. There is a government and society dominated by the Communist Party. BUT, this is a country changing dramatically in its economy, its competitiveness, its openness, and in how it sees itself. Its citizens have experienced dramatic improvement in their living standards and their future looks very bright to most of them.

We need them as partners and friends, not adversaries.