

<i>Commentary</i>

Jiang Zemin's Vision of China

by Michael Sloboda, M.M.

On September 12, President Jiang Zemin gave the keynote address at the opening of the 15th National Congress of the Communist Party of China.¹ This policy statement has been analyzed from economic and political angles in a number of publications.² Here I will simply note a few points that may be of interest to our readers. I will then add some theological comments.



During this very long speech of some 28,000 characters, religion is mentioned only once. It is mentioned along with human rights within Jiang's purview of the international scene:

It is still serious that 'human rights' and other issues are used to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries. Local conflicts due to ethnic, religious and territorial factors crop up from time to time. The world is not yet tranquil.³

Religion may be a destabilizing force in some parts of the world, but by implication not in China. Looking at his nation, Jiang does not see religion as an issue worth dwelling on. There is something to be said for benign neglect of religious believers, but perhaps the tens of thousands who work in the Religious Affairs Bureau might feel neglected by Party Central. However, the Party intends to encourage not only Communism but also "all ideologies and ethics" that are conducive to the lofty goals of national unification, ethnic unity, economic development and social progress.⁴ Philosophy and social sciences buttress the guiding

position of Marxism, while the popularization of science and technology will help “eliminate ignorance and combat feudal and superstitious activities.”⁵

While Jiang speaks at length of interacting with the rest of the world in economics, technology and culture, he repeats that China’s internal affairs are not fair game for outside critics. But when Jiang speaks of developing socialist democracy by improving existing institutions and establishing new mechanisms for getting the leadership into better contact with the grass roots, as in the clause “ensuring that the people enjoy extensive rights and freedom endowed by law, and respecting and guaranteeing human rights,”⁶ he does not need to distance himself from China’s viewpoint on human rights.

Women are mentioned in the sentence:

We should pay great attention to fostering and promoting women cadres, cadres from among ethnic minorities and non-Party cadres.⁷

Jiang links population control to China’s limited natural resources. But thanks to science, the nation can achieve sustainable development, and the people’s standard of living can continue to improve. This is “the fundamental goal of the reform, opening up and economic development.”⁸

Jiang makes it clear that corruption and decadent ideas of self-indulgence are corrosive. There is no room for complacency. This is “a grave political struggle vital to the very existence of the Party and the State.”⁹ Jiang admits that it is more than just a theoretical possibility that a corrupt Party could lose the confidence of the people. But Communists should not allow this to happen. The objectives of a strong nation and prosperous people by the year 2010 are worth the struggle.

Looking farther into the future, Jiang has a more lofty goal: “We are striving to advance toward the maximum program - the ultimate realization of communism.”¹⁰

Jiang Zemin has a vision of progress. He and his colleagues in the Party leadership are men (almost all of them are males) of the modern age. Science, high technology, education, industry and

economic growth are all good and will lead to human happiness. He is not post-modern; he does not question the ideology of the nation state with a strong central government. Jiang does not worry about limits to growth but has faith in technological fixes to ecological problems. Having seen destitution glamorized as a revolutionary virtue earlier in the history of the People's Republic, he now agrees with the late Deng Xiaoping that "to get rich is glorious". He is neither a poet nor a mystic by nature; he is an engineer by training and outlook. Technical problems like pollution and spiritual problems like corruption will respond to human effort, specifically the efforts of 54 million Party members.

It must be difficult for Jiang and his circle to understand a non-materialistic, let alone a theistic, viewpoint. Phrases like "Small is beautiful," "Money does not buy happiness," "God will provide," and "People do not live by bread alone," are absent from his 28,000 character address. Jiang is not the only contemporary head of state who would agree with Bismarck's saying: "You cannot govern a country according to the Sermon on the Mount," yet he seems less plagued by doubts than most leaders about the negative side-effects of rapid economic growth and modernization.

Unlike the Communist worldview, the Christian vision is not limited to this life. Yet Christians in Jiang's China live in a materialistic society. In some places it is a hedonistic and money-mad society. If Jiang's vision comes true, if China in 2049 becomes as rich and powerful as he hopes it will be, and as some foreigners fear, it will be even harder than it is today to live the Gospel in China. But if ecological, institutional and human limitations frustrate the ultimate realization of communism, then the Gospel message may appeal to many more people in China. All kinds of optimists and pessimists have been proved wrong before. I am not privy to God's plans, so I will end with the comment: "Wait and see," or more precisely "Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong." (1Cor 16:13)

Endnotes

¹English translation by Xinhua in supplement to the *China Daily*, Tuesday, Sept. 23, 1997.

²For instance, "Private Party," by Matt Forney, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, vol. #160, #40, Oct. 2, 1997, pp. 18-21.

³*China Daily*, Sept. 23, 1997, p. S-5, Section IX.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. S-4, Section VII.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. S-4, Section VII.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. S-4, Section VI.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. S-5, Section X.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. S-4, Section V.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. S-5, Section X.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. S-5, Section X.

Errata

In Issue #100 *Tripod*, through an oversight, placed [SJ] after Bishop Gong Pinmei's name on page 31.

Also it was pointed out that in the write-up on Celso Costantini, the year, 1935, given for his cardinalate, was incorrect. *Tripod* checked the original source, which also listed 1935 as the correct date. However, on further reflection, it would seem that the source used was in error and the date should have read, 1953.

Tripod regrets these errors.