

A General Discussion of China's 30 Years of Openness and Reform

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In the blinking of an eye, China's policy of openness and reform has been in effect for 30 years. The Chinese authorities have broadcast this great fact, which means that the reform policy will continue to be put into practice. However, since the authorities' memories are all centered on achievements, I expect that other aspects of life will not be touched upon. Therefore, there is no harm in looking at the positive and negative experiences of the last 30 years from the people's point of view.

At the beginning of the reform program, China's leaders had already determined that they would follow the road of: "economics first, and then politics." Later, when the Soviet Union collapsed, and the socialist enterprise in Eastern Europe changed color, this confirmed the Chinese leaders' faith that they were on the right road. Objectively speaking, in the past 30 years, the Chinese economic reforms have achieved results, which make the Chinese people proud. This is reflected in various statistics.

Up to last year, China's gross domestic product (GDP) reached more than 2.4 trillion U.S. dollars, the fourth largest in the world. Actually, China's economic strength is close on the heels of Germany's, and has even surpassed Germany's. It is only that last year the euro rose in value. After factoring in an exchange with American dollars, Germany's GDP rose above China's. One can predict that this year, or next, China's GDP will surpass Germany's.

Moreover, China has already become the world's 3rd largest country in terms of international trade. Last year, the value of China's exports was 2.17 trillion U.S. dollars. Ten years ago, China

was not even among the top ten trading nations of the world. But in recent years, it has quickly caught up, and has become the world's factory. The types of products exported have gone from the lowest level to the highest level, and the variety of products is still developing.

Since international trade is continually developing, China's foreign exchange reserves are rising at a rapid rate. Today, China has the largest amount of foreign reserves of any country in the world, surpassing even Japan. At the beginning of this year, China's foreign reserves reached 1.7 trillion U.S. dollars, and each year it will increase by almost 100 billion. This is a source of admiration and pride to many onlookers.

Besides this, the people's livelihood has generally improved. If one considers people's average income, China has already reached an average of 2,000 U.S. dollars per year. In some more developed areas, the average income has already reached 5,000 U.S. dollars or above. These achievements are worthy of affirmation.

However, at the same time as China's economic development advances at a rapid rate, several social problems have cropped up. For example, the already wide gap between the rich and poor is continually growing larger. This causes society to become more and more unstable. If we take the Gini co-efficient index, which measures the difference between rich and poor as an example, although the authorities are not in the habit of mentioning this, many scholars of society in China have pointed out that China's Gini co-efficient index has already reached 0.52. This is way above the international warning level of 0.37 to 0.4. The government once announced that the figure was only 0.45, which appears to be somewhat of an underestimation.

In the situation of extreme differences between the rich and the poor, the disparity is continually getting wider. Many unemployed people, or those who, because of difficulties, feel powerless, will naturally take to the streets to demonstrate their grievances. Therefore, petitions, demonstrations, and appeals to higher authorities are continually on the rise. In 1992, when the

authorities first began to keep statistics on such events, the number of them did not go beyond 9,000. However, last year (2007), the number of such demonstrations surpassed 90,000, a ten-fold increase. These are only the official statistics. But if we look at the figures compiled from the studies of mainland sociologists, the figure they arrive at is over 120,000 of such examples of unrest. One can see that the causes for instability in society cannot be overlooked. This is the reason that the authorities are always emphasizing that they must ensure that there is a harmonious society in China.

Development can take place along the double track of economics and solving problems of the people's livelihood. But it is a different story for the single track of political reform. Also, the pace of development of this track is somewhat slow. Sometimes it goes forward, sometimes it stops, and sometimes it retreats backwards. This causes people to lose hope.

During the 30 years of openness and reform, the one time people felt hope for Chinese politics was in the later years of the 1980's, especially in 1987, when the Communist Party held its 13th Party Congress. Many intellectuals described this meeting as China's second Liberation (the 1st Liberation being in 1949, when the country was established).

At the 13th Party Congress, The Chinese Communist Party, for the first time since the open door policy began, introduced competitive elections. Also for the very first time, they clearly declared in the Party Constitution that the people can know all important matters, and the people can discuss all important matters. Moreover, they declared for the first time that the Party and the government should be separated. They also encouraged other persons to participate in politics and to discuss politics. Shortly thereafter, Democratic Party members were appointed to high offices, even to the position of Deputy Minister.

In an atmosphere of continuing openness, freedom in the mass media developed more rapidly than in the past. Except for sensitive issues and political topics, which still required careful

handling, general economic, livelihood, social and cultural topics were wide-open for discussion.

However, China's political reform always goes ahead very slowly. This was especially true after "June 4, 1989". China's upper echelon of leaders began to have even more misgivings about political reform. They had no faith in going forward with it. For example, although the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee still maintained the form of competitive elections, yet the percentage of seats to be filled by competitive election was only 5%, which has risen to 8.3% now, an increase of only 3.3% in 20 years. This is far below people's expectations.

At the same time, there are also preliminary elections, which allows the authorities to manipulate the results. For elections at the highest level, in the last 20 years, there has been no progression in openness. To take the elections at the highest level of the Party as an example, in the last 20 years, competitive elections have only been held for members of the Central Committee. For elections within the Politburo, non-competitive elections are still the order of the day. In the 20 years up to today, the system has not changed much, practically not at all. Regarding elections in the National Peoples Congress, 20 years ago, competitive elections were held only for positions below the Standing Committee. Non-competitive elections were held even for deputy Standing Committee members. In the 20 years up to today, the situation is still the same.

What causes one to sigh even more in despair is that many of the chairpersons of the peoples congresses at the provincial and municipal levels are appointed by the Party secretaries of those places. Thus it is even more easy to bring the Party's will to bear in the local peoples congresses and in the local government. This really is a return to the old road of "unity of Party and government."

In conclusion, today's Chinese leaders have absorbed the lessons of past experience. They are willing to try new methods of administration, but they are not adept at doing it yet. The most critical reason for this is that they do not yet have a modern political outlook, nor do they know how to give up power. However, in the

intervening 30 years, civil society in China has undergone a great change. No matter if it is on the level of knowledge, the level of economics or the level of international relations, the intelligence of the Chinese people is continually developing. Beginning with the 1980's of the last century, the number of publicly funded Chinese students who have gone abroad for further study is more than 550,000. It is more difficult to get a figure for the number of privately funded overseas Chinese students. The "Returned Students Group," who have come back to work in China, are continually having a greater influence on society. Add to this the development of the internet (China is estimated to have 130 million internet users at the present time). Thus the channels of communication are already quite broad. One can foresee that the Chinese people will become more and more sophisticated as time goes on. To keep using the obscurantist policies of the Mao Zedong era to keep the people ignorant will definitely not be successful.