



One China, Two Freemans

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I am delighted to join Professor Carla Freeman here this evening. I admire her as a scholar even as I remember her as a remarkably muscular and willful infant, gifted student and ballerina, and the beautiful young woman whom I gave away in marriage when she was twenty-three. Carla is my eldest child and my only daughter. I am proud of her achievements, not just as an academic and university administrator but as the mother of two of my eight grandchildren. I cannot match her knowledge of international relations theory, her expertise on China's northeastern region and its neighbors, or her ability as a teacher. I'd like to think I had something to do with her decision to study China and to explain it to her students.

But it may be genetic. Neither Carla nor I was aware when we got interested in China that we were not the first in our family to do so. Three of Carla's great-great-grandfathers (my great-grandfathers) worked in China. Around 1900, Chas Wellman, after whom I am named, was hired by Zhang Zhidong [张之洞] to help upgrade the Chinese steel industry. John Ripley Freeman taught briefly at Tsinghua University around 1915. He was lured back to China in 1920 by Sun Yat-sen (孙中山), for whom he designed what ultimately became the Three Gorges Dam [三峡水坝]. And the classes that my maternal great-grandfather, Robert Ezra Park, a pioneer American sociologist, taught at what is now Beijing University were the subject of enthusiastic commentaries by Fei Xiaotong (费孝通) and C. K. Yang [杨庆堃].

Unlike my daughter, I am not a China specialist or scholar. I am a retired diplomat. Diplomacy involves critical thinking that resembles scholarship. But diplomacy is different. It rests on empathy more than received knowledge, texts, or quantitative analysis. It demands insight beyond the purely intellectual into what makes foreigners do foreign things. Diplomacy is grounded in personal experience, apprenticeship, and area knowledge. It is culture-specific, reliant on intuition, attuned to emotion as well as reason as a behavioral determinant, and tested in daily professional interactions with counterparts.

Diplomacy is footnote-free, applied scholarship that seeks truth from foreign facts and tries to use this to influence particular foreigners. It embraces the lore of international interactions but does not seek to state broad hypotheses about their nature. It is hostile to deductive reasoning from theory. It seeks satisfaction in the anonymous achievement of change rather than in the credential-building of the publish-or-perish academic potlatch.

The aim of diplomacy is neither to theorize about nor to explain foreign behavior in general but to anticipate, manage, adjust, or cope with particular instances of it. As a diplomat, I studied and worked in China as well as a half-dozen other foreign polities. In the course of doing so, I reported on Chinese trends and events, analyzed their significance for American interests as well as China, and predicted their possible

outcomes . But explaining China was not my main purpose. I was trying to inform a strategy for altering relations with China to the short and long-term advantage of the United States.

In all the places I served my country, including China, I read as much history and literature on the national culture as I could find, learned the language, studied the economy, and – to the extent I could, consistent with my status as an American official – immersed myself in local life. As a diplomat, my goal was to become able to anticipate the emotional and intellectual prejudices that decision-makers in the host country would bring to bear on trends and events. If I could become comfortable in their language, lore, and literature, I thought, I could see the world through their eyes and intuit their feelings about it. If I could read their language, I could follow their policy debates. If I could read it upside down, I could read their briefing books at the negotiating table. If I could understand how they decided who got what, when, and how, I might be able to influence them to do things that served American interests.

In the case of China, therefore, like other diplomats, I searched for patterns of behavior and strengths as well as weaknesses. I looked for Chinese narratives, stereotypes, misunderstandings, and prejudices more than for Chinese wisdom or clairvoyance. After all, I was charged with finding ways to redirect, not simply explain, Chinese policies and practices. Diplomats are practitioners of the arts of power, focused on foreseeing and deflecting the course of the future, not explaining the past or present. But to change the future, one must understand the past.

One must also have policies with feasible objectives to implement. Often that is not the case. Diplomacy is a political performing art. One must play the role one is assigned. But unless the script can be made to appeal to its foreign audience, the play is just posturing for the home front, not a serious effort to change foreign minds or behavior. Diplomats see the other country's policies as its illnesses and their own country's policies as the potential courses of treatment. Since they can do little to alter the patient's prospects in the absence of sound courses of action from their own government, diplomats' hopes tend to produce efforts by them to improve their own country's policies. That makes them natural critics of the conventional wisdom in their capital. And this often makes them unpopular at home.

Diplomats cannot afford the self-righteousness of the courtiers and securocrats who flutter like fruit flies around their country's leaders. Politicians prosper by blaming others, not themselves, for everything that is unexpected or has gone awry. Unlike them, diplomats cannot gain catharsis by denouncing foreigners and their un-American ways. They must preserve the ability to make their country's case to the very same foreigners their leaders wish to insult. They must be able to persuade these foreigners that their interests would be better served by doing what the diplomats' leaders propose than by doing what they originally thought was necessary and right. If diplomats are seen as hostile or lacking in empathy and hence insincere in making arguments that purport to serve the best interests of their foreign counterparts, they will lose the case before they get a chance to make it. Even when conveying a declaration of war, diplomats seek to keep international differences in a condition of negotiability, rather than abandoning the politesse or severing the links that make discussion of them possible.

This puts diplomats in an uncomfortable position in their own capital. Their government looks to them to explain foreign behavior and motivations but easily confuses their description of unpalatable foreign views with sympathy for those views. Foreign realities usually contradict popular domestic narratives. Failure to embrace these narratives is often mistaken for disloyalty. Politicians tend to misperceive diplomats' desire

to keep lines of communication open as “clientitis” or appeasement. And efforts by diplomats to change government policies to make them more effective by adapting them to local realities naturally pit them against those in the policy establishment who came up with these policies and remain committed to them.

Those who work on China policy have historical reason to be especially sensitive to these political realities. I joined the Foreign Service of the United States in 1965, when the right-wing “China Lobby” (the “Committee of One Million”) ruled Capitol Hill and the ghost of Joe McCarthy still roamed the corridors of the Department of State. The desk I later sat at as director of Chinese and Mongolian affairs was the very one whose contents the FBI seized when they hauled off John Stewart Service – then America’s most gifted “China hand” – on charges that he was a Communist sympathizer.

One of my main reasons for wanting to serve my country as a diplomat was my belief, formed in 1964 while I was in law school at Harvard, that the geopolitical geometry would force China and America to reach out to each other, finding a way to set aside the Taiwan issue and the lost cause of recovering the mainland for Chiang Kai-shek [蒋中正]. To say this was politically risky, but I was convinced it would happen and wanted to be there when it did. I fought to get into Chinese language training. And, to my own astonishment, I ended up in Beijing with President Nixon in February 1972, advancing the opening of the U.S. Liaison Office in Beijing in 1973, and playing key roles in shaping US-China normalization in its most malleable period, its first six years.

So I got to know Zhou Enlai [周恩来] and some of the officials he had mentored – men like Huang Hua [黄华], Xiong Xianghui [熊向晖], Qiao Guanhua [乔冠华], Zhang Wenjin [章文晋], Han Xu [韩叙] – as well as others of importance in the formation of modern China – like Ye Jianying [叶剑英] and Li Xiannian [李先念]. This was a treat. But Beijing in the early 1970s was not. Opportunities for interaction with ordinary Chinese were virtually non-existent, so foreign life in Beijing resembled nothing so much as house arrest. There were no 小吃 [small eateries], teahouses, bookshops, brightly dressed people, lively conversations, or any other evidences of the vitality that makes Chinese life a sensory and intellectual delight. Mao Zedong [毛泽东] had made a cultural desert and called it a revolution. Asked to stay on at the new Liaison Office, I did not hesitate to decline, swearing that I would return only when China had changed.

I never imagined how much it would change and how fast. The December 1978 3rd Plenum of the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party was still five years away. And when it happened, no one took it seriously, including -- at first -- me. And then, as autumn approached in 1979, I encountered a man selling noodle soup at the corner of Chang’an Avenue [长安大街] and Nan Chizi [南池子], just off Tiananmen Square [天安门广场]. No such street food had been seen in China for decades, so this was as startling as it would have been to bump into a reincarnated Dowager Empress [慈禧太后] doing the cancan there.

As you can probably guess from my heroic girth, I like noodles. So I bought a bowl and asked the vendor what work unit he belonged to. He replied, “I am my own work unit. 我是个体户.” With the pasta came the revelation: the 3rd Plenum had launched a second revolution.

Not long thereafter, as country director for China, I was at a large meeting of government and academic China specialists at the Smithsonian Castle. The purpose of the gathering was to assess where China might

be in the year 2000. I was the only one there prepared to argue that Deng Xiaoping might be engineering a fundamental transformation of communist China. I was so disgusted by the unwillingness of my colleagues to question the conventional wisdom that I went back to my office and spent the night writing a paper speculating about what the success of Dengism might produce in China.

(You can read the paper online at a link – <http://justworldbooks.com/interesting-times-forecasting-change-in-china/> – listed at page at page 170 of my book, *Interesting Times: China, America, and the Shifting Balance of Prestige*.)

When I circulated my paper to the intelligence community and my colleagues at the American Consulate General in Hong Kong (then our premier China-watching post), they ridiculed me for suggesting that China's economy might grow at an annual rate of at least 7 percent and making other projections about the impact of Dengist policies that they saw as wildly over-optimistic. In the event, of course, my projections greatly underestimated what China would achieve.

Over the past three-and-a-half decades, China has quite unexpectedly bootstrapped itself into a position near the top of the global capitalist economy. "One belt, one road" promises to place China at the center of Eurasia, the world's geopolitical and geo-economic heartland. I have seen China poor, drab, and weak. And I have seen it become rich, colorful, and rambunctious.

China is now transforming itself again in ways that make me less certain about its future than before. But I must be humble in offering prognostications at an academic conference like this. I am a diplomat who is sometimes not scholarly. We can discuss contemporary China and its problems to better effect after we hear from a scholar who is always diplomatic in her disagreements with me -- my daughter, Professor Carla Freeman.