

Conversations about China

Remarks at an Informal Gathering on “Foreign/ Foreigner Views of China” at Walan Restaurant, Machang Dao Campus, Tianjin Foreign Studies University, China

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Good evening everyone.

Studying in a foreign studies university in China has exposed me to a range of worldviews about China. Everywhere I went I encountered smoky conditions and often witnessed people – both Chinese and foreigners – wearing face masks. As an African, in my assessment about hankering for material welfare, I have always considered such situations the pains of progress and necessary evils.

However, some of my foreign colleagues and some Chinese alike have demonstrated some detest for such conditions because they come with both human and environmental costs. The Chinese have worked very hard to cause such conditions to happen; sometimes around the clock. However, I would like to make my observations based on my interactions here in China in the past two months.

The Chinese Work Very Hard for Whom?

In the individualistic economies exemplified by the West and, to a lesser extent, by Africa, hard work is meant for fulfilling individual interests, and national development is a consequence. There is no purpose-driven development like in China where most successful enterprises are entirely state-owned and bear responsibility towards advancing the economic space in the country and in guaranteeing employment opportunities to the millions of the Chinese. This moral responsibility, to a larger extent, forms the work edict of the Chinese, where every task assigned to them is executed with near religious fundamentalism.

The Chinese work for the state because they are the state. Majority of the Chinese people just perform their part and leave all others to the next person or to the next generation. The near selfless execution of tasks by the Chinese people outside war-imposed conditions in recent times has produced a cultural divergence from all others.

Is It a Boring Life?

One of my Western friends said to me that Chinese everyday life is boring. There are specific times for work, and for fun. They don't spend their time in the drinking sprees. They eat as they drink in the stipulated meal-course times.

Some would even attest that they live two different lives. There is the "Chinese time with everyone" and there is the "purely Chinese time". For instance, in their studies the Chinese students would go back to the classroom at night for purely Chinese discussions, which, significantly, help in expanding the worldviews of fellow Chinese by learning from one another. After normal study time, we, foreigners, go to a nearby pub to drink, preferably until the following morning. Some of my colleagues missed classes as a result of that.

But I came to establish that the Chinese life is both interesting and boring after its fashion. The fact that they are making steady progress is a clear validation of this assertion. That lifestyle has enabled a savings culture and consequent game-changing socio-economic investments.

The Long View

China faces some unique conditions in its development that entail balancing different dynamics – sometimes deferring certain ambitions or executing them *Salami style* [1], as she keeps the focus. Is it a dream or a reality? I asked most of my foreign friends this question with respect to the future of China. Majority of them were of the view that China has already effected a *fait accompli* in global affairs, contrary to the views advanced by mainstream Western media, and that we, foreigners, should be able to come to terms with that sooner. This is attested by the underway global economic Sinicization.

Thank you.

[1] Piecemeal approach