Recollections of a China Correspondent

Norman Webster
Former editor-in-chief, The Globe and Mail, Toronto
E-mail: dwebster@ubishops.ca

You may have heard the story. Three prisoners meet in a cell in Beijing. The first confesses that “I am here because I opposed the policies of Deng Xiaoping.” “That’s curious,” says the second. “I am here because I supported the policies of Deng Xiaoping.” The two turn to the third, who says gloomily “I am Deng Xiaoping.” The details may not be exact, but things really were that crazy in China four decades ago. Dictatorships tend to work that way. Witness, as we speak, the Kim family firm and its depredations in the mad kingdom of North Korea.

Deng Xiaoping, the pepper pot from Sichuan, could have given survival lessons to U.S. President Richard M. Nixon. From his exalted post as Mao Zedong’s close associate, Deng had descended into near oblivion during Mao’s Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in the middle of the 1960s. When I arrived with my family in Beijing in 1969, to spend two years as The Globe and Mail’s resident correspondent, literally hundreds of millions of Chinese regularly chanted their hatred of this man and his treacherous allies. “Renegade, hidden traitor, and scab” was one of the more colorful labels the masses affixed to his name, waving their red books of Mao quotations. It was, all in all, quite a decade, with Mao, the great lord of misrule, making a last kick at immortality. China during that time was perhaps as closed a society as it had been at any time since Britain’s Lord Macartney arrived at the court of Qianlong in 1793 with some helpful suggestions from King George III. History records that the emperor was not amused.

During my two years as correspondent in Beijing, there were exactly three western news organizations with bureaus in the capital—one representing Agence France Presse, one the West German news agency Deutsche Presse Agentur (DPA), and one from the Toronto Globe and Mail—me. I was in fact the fifth Globe correspondent to cover what was commonly known at the time as “Red China” from the inside. My newspaper’s bureau,
established in 1959, seems to have resulted from a combination of practicality and personality. The Globe wanted to cover the People’s Republic of China (PRC); Beijing wanted its Xinhua representatives to be able to tell the leadership what was really happening in the rest of the world, particularly in the United States. Each was represented by a strong personality, Foreign Minister Chen Yi on the one side and on the other, the formidable Oakley Dalgleish, the great and feared publisher of The Globe and Mail, who sported a black eye patch as he made the rounds of power in Canada. They came together at a meeting in Beijing, maybe sent out for a bottle or two, and the deal was done: bureaus and correspondents in Canada and the PRC. With some rocky periods, the arrangement has endured to this day.

The fourteen or so other news organizations in my time in Beijing represented an assortment of socialist regimes that told their men what to write—from the Soviet Union, East Germany, North Vietnam, Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, and the like. Eventually a nice man from Cuba joined our ranks, but it was rather hard to think of him as a journalist, so I will stick with my figure of three Westerners covering 800 million or so Chinese (plus, a few haunted Japanese correspondents who always seemed on the point of expulsion for the sins of their bosses in Tokyo).

We journalists had a curious status in the Middle Kingdom. At a time when the regime was telling its own people as little as possible as untruthfully as possible, it did not tell us much that was accurate or useful either. Furthermore, the equipment available plus difficulties in filing a news story made this a genuine hardship post, professionally speaking. I can only mutter with resentment these days when reminiscing about “Peking,” as we called it then, with such Globe or Canadian Broadcasting Corporation colleagues as Jan Wong, Don Murray, Patrick Brown or Mark MacKinnon. Nowadays, foreign journalists in China dial their newsrooms directly and zip, off the words or film go. In my day, it took two full days to have an exchange by cable with Toronto. There were no telephone links for us with the outside world. More nights than I care to remember, I would drive down through Tiananmen Square to the main cable office where, surrounded by suspicious Chinese trying to make long distance calls to the provinces, I would type my stuff and deliver it for punching to Reuters in Hong Kong, which bounced it through to London to arrive, eventually, in Toronto.

The regime’s information blackout at that time sounds almost unreal now. When I arrived in September 1969, 800 million Chinese did not know American astronauts recently had landed on the moon. The New China News Agency portrayed China-friendly Albania as a rising power in the