

Collana Sapienza per tutti 9



# Things That a Diplomat in China Should Not Have Seen

*Mario Filippo Pini*



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In copertina | *Cover image:* Antique tortoise sculptures, scattered in a field near a suburban street in Beijing. The commemorative steles originally mounted on top of the tortoises were probably smashed by the Red Guards, who then dragged the heavy tortoise sculptures away from their original location. The Red Guards' deed must have been carried out during the early years of the Cultural Revolution, in 1966 or 1967. But in 1971 the pathetic remains of the old monuments were still in the place where they had been abandoned a few years earlier, becoming a subject of interest for the author's camera.

*Dedicated to the Memory  
of my Teacher Ezra Vogel*



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# Preface

If we are willing to believe the “China Dream” of Xi Jinping, the current Party and state leader of the People’s Republic of China, by the middle of this century China will be a prosperous, militarily formidable global power. In the year 2050, Xi Jinping, if he is still alive, will be almost 100 years old. But this does not matter to him. What matters to him now is to remain firmly in power, probably as long as his health will allow, moving ahead one step at a time, and having absolute faith in his infallibility and his chosen political line. By the year 2027, the modernization of the armed forces should be complete,<sup>1</sup> and, by the year 2035, the Chinese people should be reaching the level of prosperity enjoyed by South Korea today.<sup>2</sup> Chinese foreign policy, aimed at carrying the nation to global relevance, also has a long-term vision. An essential feature is the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI), so called because of the old Silk Road and the sea routes that link China to Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. The BRI is an infrastructural development strategy, theoretically beneficial to about seventy countries, financed by Chinese capital, and often considered in the West to be an instrument that China will use to bend economically fragile countries to its will. The BRI, because of its intrinsic magnitude, will progress only gradually and will not reach its conclusion, at least according to Xi’s grand vision, until the centennial of the founding of the People’s Republic of China in the year 2049.

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<sup>1</sup> David Shambaugh, *China’s Leaders, From Mao to Now* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2021), p. 306.

<sup>2</sup> Tony Saich, *From Rebel to Ruler: One Hundred Years of the Chinese Communist Party* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021), p. 434

To attain his desired goals, Xi is trying to modify the economic model that has been so successful from Deng Xiaoping onward, a model that, by now, has outlived its usefulness. China can no longer rely on state investments and international trade. It must become a center of innovation and high-quality production, and it must develop a huge internal market. Furthermore, Xi has waged a war on corruption in ways that have been much more decisive than any of anti-corruption campaigns attempted by his predecessors during the last several decades, and he has been promoting plain living, especially among cadres<sup>3</sup> and Party members. At the same time, he seems to harken back to still older days, to the era of Mao Zedong. He has made all possible efforts to strengthen his own personal power, resuscitating the cult of personality. He preaches—and asks of all Chinese to accept—an absolute faith in and devotion to the Communist Party as the only savior of China, the only force capable of carrying the country to the loftiest of heights of happiness, well-being, and global greatness that are the country's aspirations. He has given new preeminence to the public sector and to state-owned enterprises, the same state-owned enterprises that so encumbered the economy in the past. He has also promoted pervasive control of the Party over all aspects of society and has restricted the flow of not only foreign ideas but also of internal ideas that might somehow challenge the official line. He has cracked down on dissidents, on intellectuals, on NGOs, and on religion, which he calls “spiritual anesthesia,” a modern-sounding characterization but nevertheless perfectly in line with the traditional Marxist imputation of religion as the “opium of the people.” He has promoted a rewriting of history for the purpose of consolidating the myth of the infallible leadership of the Party. Inside Xi's China, the tragedies of the Great Leap Forward and of the Cultural Revolution are forgotten; if they are mentioned, they are referred to as “experiments” that bore useful fruit.

The China of today is therefore a China quite different from the one we have known during the last several decades. It is a China more assertive and more determined to achieve greatness; at the same time, it is a China more intolerant of any form of dissent, keenly pursuing the ubiquitous control of society that was typical during the Mao era. This time, however, it is using new information technologies that were totally unknown in the past. This reality has compelled me to meditate on

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<sup>3</sup> A “cadre” (*ganbu*) in China is a person managing state and/or Party affairs.

the relevance of this book, which basically is a collection of snapshots of Chinese society during the first forty years of Communist rule, enriched by my reminiscences of diplomatic life in Beijing many years ago. Then, is this book—focusing on the 1949–1989 period—a belated obsolete effort, considering how much China is changing under Xi’s leadership? A foreigner visiting China is reputed to once having asked Premier Zhou Enlai how he evaluated the French Revolution of 1789. The distinguished guest was probably trying to provoke Zhou Enlai, hoping that the Chinese statesman might come out with a statement that would be useful to understand the Chinese Communist way of thinking. If this was the aim of the foreigner, he must have been disappointed when Zhou Enlai simply observed that it was still too early to tell. However, this story, which I heard many years ago, might not be true. In the past, many anecdotes, often invented, whirled around the mysterious leaders of the People’s Republic. But common sense does not need the supposed wisdom of Zhou Enlai. It does not need his statement that history evolves over a very long time and historians must wait centuries to be able to decipher the influence of great events. This is because when we look at the political or social problems surrounding us, we immediately know that these issues have not sprung out from nowhere. They have existed for a long time, or at least they have strong roots in the past. Within the framework of this obvious truth, I have found a reassuring answer to my doubts, a confirmation of the enduring relevance of what I have written.

China is enormously more powerful and wealthy today than it was thirty years ago, but it is still struggling with many problems. Some, like the necessity to end its reliance on exports for development, are rather recent. Others, like the alarming aging of the population owing to the now-abandoned one-child policy, have older roots, as they can be traced back to the first decade of the reforms. Still others, like the very limited income of a large share of the population, or like pollution, are even much older. Finally, others—that I should not call problems, but rather worrying realities—like the secrecy of the political system and the pervasive, capillary control of society from above—are embedded in the DNA of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). All of these realities are present, at times embryonically, in my book. I bring them to life using concrete examples that generally are not new to scholars in the China field. But they are useful reminders of the roots of what China has become today. They thus deserve a place in the today’s narrative of an evolving China.

If we leave aside political and social issues, and we focus instead on our own personal lives, we instinctively know that *the past is the present*, namely, our past experiences live inside us, shape our personalities, our way of thinking, and our way of interpreting reality. Simply said, a person can only be understood in the context of his/her own life. When Xi Jinping, born in 1953, was only 9 years old, he had the traumatic experience of the purge of his father, at that time a vice premier, who was accused of crimes he likely never committed. (Xi senior was later rehabilitated and called to new and important responsibilities. But this was not until Mao had already been dead for two years, and after sixteen years of suffering—first under house arrest, then in a labor camp, and finally in prison.) During the Cultural Revolution, Xi, at the age of 16, had a second traumatic experience. Like many young city students, he was sent to work in the countryside, in his case to Liangjiahe village in Shaanxi province, which was plagued by dry soil, strong winds, and overwhelming poverty. Xi was compelled to remain there for six years, the first three of which he labored doing backbreaking jobs side by side the local peasants, and the next three mostly as a secretary of the production brigade to which he had been assigned. I have personally known quite a few Chinese who, when only teenagers during the Mao era, were rusticated to miserable, remote places in the countryside and were forced to remain there for many years without knowing when, or even if, they could return to their city homes and their studies. These people, as a consequence, have developed a strong dislike—to say the least—for the Communist Party. Not Xi, however. He applied for Party membership on a number of occasions, but without success, probably because of his family background, tainted as he was by his father's disgrace. At the age of 21, he was finally accepted in the Party, and one year later he managed to be recalled to Beijing to enroll at prestigious Tsinghua University, where he earned a degree in organic chemistry. After graduation, he began his career in the Party that, after less than four decades and after a string of assignments in the provinces and in Beijing, would bring him to the highest position in the country and party. We will never know exactly how Xi's difficult youth traumatized his personality and shaped his way of thinking. Observers can only say, without fear of making risky assumptions, that Xi, like all successful leaders, is resilient and perseverant. I should add that he lived more than half his early life inside the China that is described in my book.



In 1971, when I was working in the Italian embassy in Beijing, Xi Jinping, then 18, was toiling in the countryside near Liangjiahe village. That autumn, Lin Biao, Mao Zedong's designated heir, died in a plane accident while trying to escape to the Soviet Union after his failed attempt to seize power. In Chapter II, I describe how strange I felt when I saw a huge stele with a message glorifying Mao and Lin Biao, still standing near Tiananmen Square, a good two months *after* the disappearance of the regime's No. 2. In fact, at the time the news of Lin's betrayal and failed escape was fed to the population only piecemeal—and it was never publicized. It was not until 1973, during the Tenth Party Congress, almost two years after the face-losing incident, that the regime openly recounted the crimes, both real and not real, committed by Lin Biao. News of the death of Lin Biao, therefore, must have reached the ears of young Xi Jinping—with some delay and only after it was properly filtered by the local Party authorities—as he was digging irrigation ditches and shoveling manure. For foreign observers (and for me, living a privileged life in Beijing), the behavior of the Communist Party after the death of Lin Biao is a macroscopic example of the secretiveness of the entire system. For Xi, stuck in the countryside against his will, the story must have been further proof of the harshness of life inside the Party.

At the time of the 1989 Tiananmen tragedy, I was again posted to Beijing, while Xi Jinping, then 36 years old, was a respectable middle-ranking Party official in charge of Ningde prefecture in Fujian—a place that occupies a small portion of this book. In Chapter I, I introduce a letter written to the *People's Daily* by two individuals who are lamenting the killing of forty-six baby girls in two mountainous Fujian villages, Xiu Ling and Lin Bing, located in Fu'an county, one of the nine administrative sub-division of Ningde prefecture. In the missive, the two diligent comrades are also lamenting the fact that the same grim situation—the widespread killing of baby girls—was also occurring in other nearby villages, and, as a result, females only accounted for 36 percent of the total population in all of Fu'an county. Consequently, the letter continues, “the reality of wives for rent, wives given as pawns, and shared wives, is sadly common.”

The above letter to the *People's Daily* was written in 1953, at the beginning of Communist rule. It describes a typical situation at the time when future Party leader Xi Jinping was born, thirty-five years before his arrival in Ningde (he was assigned there one year before the Tia-

nanmen tragedy). Thirty-five years are many, but not enough to cancel memories and the scars of the past. Wives who suppressed their baby girls, for instance, or were rented, or shared, or given in pawns, in 1989 would be in their early fifties, if not even younger.

Xi Jinping worked in Ningde when the prefecture, inhabited not only by Han Chinese but also by disadvantaged minorities, faced extremely low living standards, especially in the more isolated villages connected to the outside world only by treacherous mountain trails. As a result, Xi as leader promoted export industries and tourism, typical endeavors of all conscientious officials during the reform era, but he also launched much-needed initiatives for poverty alleviation and for the construction of new road linkages to the interior mountainous areas. Furthermore, according to Chinese media, he visited almost every corner of Ningde, paying attention to local needs and endemic problems. It is therefore very likely that he learned that in Fu'an county, three and a half decades earlier, men had vastly outnumbered women and had cruelly exploited them because of the traditional customs and harsh living conditions. Xi's tenure in Ningde prefecture is but a short episode in his long and extremely successful career. But it is obvious that what he experienced there (as well as during other moments of his life, of course) must have shaped his way of thinking and ultimately his "China Dream." As for me, in the pages that follow, I am glad to have the opportunity to single out the reality that I have just described as well as many others in China's recent past that continue to resonate so significantly today.

*Mario Filippo Pini, March 2022*

# Introduction

## Why China?

My first contact with anything Chinese was not very inspiring. It happened during the winter of 1945–1946 when I was approaching my sixth birthday. I was living in a small Italian castle in one of the villages that dot so many tops of the Montferrat hills, a chain of modest elevation in northern Italy famous for wine and the view they offer, given good weather, of the Alps roughly 70 miles away. For centuries the castle had belonged to friends of my mother's family, and despite its ancient pedigree, the place hardly looked ready to withstand the assault of dangerous foes. Somebody, perhaps in the 1700s, had altered the original structure, smoothing out the crenellated walls and putting gentle terracotta frames around the windows. When my family took shelter there at the end of the World War II, part of the castle in disrepair was closed and it was not very comfortable. Nevertheless, it was a much better place to be than the Italian cities, plagued as they were by invading armies and food shortages.

I was an only child with a tendency to daydream, fascinated by my new life in the castle and things I had never seen before: the teenage sons of the lord and lady of the castle, who were experts at shooting lizards with air guns; a toothless old servant who loved to show me his yellowed teeth that he kept carefully wrapped in paper; and a mongrel dog named Pim, a fierce killer of cats and rats. My parents immediately put me in the village school even though I was not yet 6 years old, the minimum age for enrollment at the time. I imagine they had difficulty keeping me busy during that first hard winter following the war. I remember my first small gray-green report cards, issued in the

name of King Victor Emanuel III (who had not yet gone into exile), and I remember that I had no great desire to learn to read. In the few weeks during which I refused to pay attention to vowels and consonants, encouragement came in the form of well-meaning adults rapping me on the head with their knuckles. Soon, though, I somehow changed my attitude and began to make real progress, helped by the numerous children's books stashed for generations in the castle's playrooms. I was especially fascinated by those books narrating the adventures of pirates in Southeast Asia, written by Emilio Salgari, an author very popular in Italy in the late 1800s and early 1900s. They were wonderful books, with hard red covers and lots of illustrations. According to Salgari, the English colonial rulers in that part of the world were always wicked and devious, the Malaysian pirates racing around on their small, fast boats were always brave and strong, and the Chinese pirates lumbering by in their heavy junks were always numerous and blundering. Salgari was following the Italian stereotypes of his time. The English were our competitors in the Mediterranean Sea and not to be trusted. The Malaysians were practically unknown in Italy and could therefore be portrayed to the Italian public as brave pirates (fighting the English, of course). As was common knowledge even in



**Fig. 1.** This watercolor, of a side building (which in my youth was used as a chicken coop!) at Frassinello Castle, was painted by my maternal grandmother during a visit. The castle is now a bed and breakfast, photos of which offer the same view that charmed my grandmother so many years ago

Italy, the Chinese had lost wars with England, Russia, and Japan, and they could easily be cast in the role of clumsy pirates. In my innocence, I believed Salgari completely. In my mind, the Chinese were numerous, faceless, and not very threatening, at least as pirates.

I came across things Chinese a second time when I was 9 and my family, like many others in postwar Italy, was facing economic difficulties. We had moved from the castle in the Montferrat Hills down to the plains, settling in the poor neighborhood of nearby Alessandria, a city of 80,000 named after a Pope Alexander. We managed to live in an apartment that my father had invented. I say *invented*, because the apartment was not really an apartment but simply three repainted and readapted rooms that were not even connected to one another. They had originally been storerooms in the back of a garage, a long shed where the trucks of a delivery company sat parked at night. My father was the manager of that company, which was always on the verge of failure. The three rooms, one of which was the kitchen with a stove, opened onto a courtyard where, besides trucks and piles of discarded tires, there stood the one sink with running water of the “apartment” and an outhouse.

My school was on the same street as that of this so-called apartment. When the lessons finished at lunchtime, I had to face what to my young eyes was the first embarrassment of the day. So that my classmates wouldn't see where I lived, I regularly took elaborate detours on the way home. I did not want them to know I lived in a garage. Once home, I had to face the second embarrassment of the day. My mother was working as a nurse and had no time or inclination to cook, so my job was to put two large, empty pots into a straw basket, cover them with a hand towel, get on my bike, and fetch our daily meal in the lunchroom of the main post office downtown. There, according to I don't know what strange arrangement my father had worked out with the management, on six days a week an inexpensive lunch was provided. I arranged the towel, which always seemed too small, over the pots with great care so as to hide them from view. I was obsessed with the thought that people might hear the clanking of the pots and realize that I was carrying home our hot lunch. The streets on the edge of town near my garage increased my worries because they were paved with round stones taken from a nearby riverbed; they were the size of grapefruit and they made my bike bounce up and down as the pots clanked endlessly.

The radio broadcasts, to which my parents and I listened as we consumed the mailmen's thick and clotted soup and gray sausages, often mentioned a certain Chiang Kai-shek who was involved in China in the increasingly desperate Civil War against the Communists. Given that Italy was then controlled by the Christian Democratic Party and the Catholic Church, both hostile to communism and loyal to the United States, the idea that Chiang Kai-shek was in trouble and that the biggest Asian country was about to fall into Communist hands was serious enough to cause the announcer to speak in excited tones. This news, of course, did not mean much to my 9-year-old ears. I had by then moved on from my admiration of lizard-hunting teenagers and Pim, the terror of cats and rats, to breeding little birds and collecting beetles. I was not impressed by that worried voice from the radio that repeated, "Chiang Kai-shek, Chiang Kai-shek." Nor could I begin to imagine how epochal events like the defeat of Chiang Kai-shek, and the birth of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on October 1, 1949, would influence my life thereafter.

To describe how all that happened, I must move forward eleven years, when I was 20 years old. The old delivery company had finally gone bankrupt, my father had passed away, and my mother had found a job as a nurse in Pisa, about 150 miles south of Alessandria. In Pisa I finished high school and got a job in a government office that dealt with workplace injuries. At the same time, I enrolled in the Economics Department of the University of Pisa. I managed this last step quite easily because Italian public universities accepted all applicants with a high-school diploma, and they only charged a minimal tuition. The fact that I was working eight hours a day did not seem to be an insurmountable obstacle. All I needed was the willpower to study at night. My professors were not strict. I did not have to attend lectures and I could take the exams whenever I was ready. Indeed, those flexible rules meant that when the time came to sit for the exams, outside the examination room one might come across "old students" who were already in their thirties and working full time as they were trying to complete their four-year course of study.

My first adult choices—to hold a full-time job and to study during my spare time—were guided by the wish to offer proof to myself, and to my family, of my own good judgment. Unfortunately, good judgment produces good results only when it is backed by strong will and motivation. Strong will I had, motivation I did not. Though I couldn't